

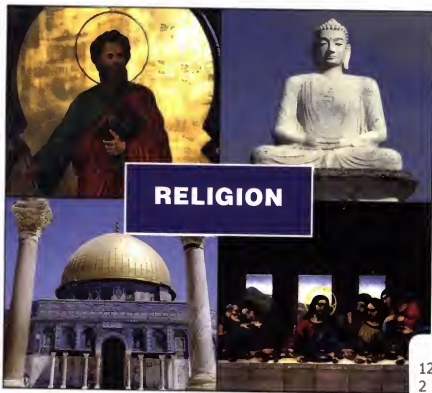


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## The Historical Jesus

Professor Bart D. Ehrman  
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*



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## **The Historical Jesus**

**Professor Bart D. Ehrman**

***University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill***

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# The Historical Jesus

Professor Bart D. Ehrman

*The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Part I



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## **Bart Ehrman, Ph.D.**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Bart Ehrman is the Bowman and Gordon Gray Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With degrees from Wheaton College (B.A.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Ph.D., magna cum laude), he taught at Rutgers for four years before moving to UNC in 1988. During his tenure at UNC, he has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including the Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award (1993), the Ruth and Philip Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement (1994), and now the Bowman and Gordon Gray Award for excellence in teaching (1998).

With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and over twenty scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited eight books, including *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999); *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford 1998); *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993); and *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (Eerdmans, 1996). He is currently at work on a new Greek-English edition of the Apostolic Fathers for the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press).

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, various local groups, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the president of the Society of Biblical Literature, SE Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E.J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, Professor Ehrman has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Religious Studies at UNC.

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# The Historical Jesus

## Scope:

From the late Roman Empire, through the Middle Ages, down to the Reformation, and into our own day, no institution has wielded such economic, political, and cultural power as the Christian church. And behind it all stands Jesus, a man who continues to be worshiped throughout the world, by over a billion people today. Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most important figure in the history of Western civilization.

Everyone who has even the faintest knowledge of Jesus has an opinion about him, and these opinions vary widely—not only among lay people but even among historical scholars who have given their lives to the task of reconstructing what Jesus was really like, what he really said and did. This course is designed to explain why it has proved so difficult to know about the man behind the myth and to see what kinds of conclusions modern scholars have drawn about him. The course will be taught from a strictly historical perspective; no particular theological beliefs will be either affirmed or denied.

The course will begin with a discussion of the four Gospels of the New Testament, which everyone agrees are our principal sources of knowledge about Jesus. But these books were not written as dispassionate histories for impartial observers. In addition, it appears that their authors were not eyewitnesses to the events they narrate but were writing several decades later, telling stories that they had heard—stories that had been in circulation year after year among the followers of Jesus. The first step, then, will be to determine what kinds of books the Gospels are and to ascertain how reliable their information about Jesus is. Apart from their worth as religious documents of faith, we will examine how the Gospels are useful to historians who want to know what really happened.

As we will see, the Gospels create challenges for scholars who want to know about the words and deeds of Jesus. After explicating some of these difficulties, we will consider other sources that are available, including other Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament but that nonetheless purport to narrate the life and teachings of Jesus. In addition, we will examine all the references to Jesus in every other ancient Jewish and Roman source.

After reviewing the available sources, we will examine the criteria that scholars have devised for getting behind the stories told about Jesus to ascertain what he was really like. Once we have a handle on how to approach our sources of information, we will consider the historical context of Jesus' life; our assumption is that if we fail to situate Jesus in his context, we will take him out of context and, therefore, misunderstand him. After discussing the political, social, and cultural history of first-century Palestine, we will proceed to the second major part of the course, a scholarly reconstruction of Jesus' actual words and deeds.

There we will see that the earliest sources at our disposal, including the Gospel of Mark and the lost Gospel of Q (one of the sources used by both Matthew and Luke), are probably correct in portraying Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist, one who anticipated that God was soon going to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his kingdom here on earth. Specifically, Jesus proclaimed that a cosmic judge from heaven, called the Son of Man, was soon to appear, and that people needed to repent, turn to God, and adhere to his own teachings in preparation. Those who did so would be rewarded with God's kingdom; those who did not would be destroyed.

The remaining lectures in the course will show how this apocalyptic message of Jesus affected his ethical teaching, his own activities, and his final days. We will see that this proclamation caused a furor in Jerusalem when Jesus went there to celebrate the Passover feast at the end of his life. Fearing that his preaching might excite the mobs, the authorities in Jerusalem had him arrested and taken out of the way, handing him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who had him executed as a troublemaker.

The course will end, then, by considering how Jesus' followers began to modify his message after they came to believe that he had been raised by God from the dead, as they transformed the religion of Jesus (i.e., the one he preached) into the religion about Jesus.



# **Lecture One**

## **The Many Faces of Jesus**

**Scope:** Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of Western civilization, whose influence moves far beyond the lives of his followers into many areas of modern life, but despite his far-ranging impact, Jesus appears to be scarcely known. Opinions of lay people and scholars about him are so much at odds with one another that they simply cannot all be right.

In this course, we will explore why this lack of information exists, with an eye toward trying to determine what Jesus actually said and did. The course will neither presuppose nor disallow any particular forms of belief (or disbelief) in Jesus; it will approach the task from a strictly historical perspective of inquiring into our surviving evidence. Questions we will ask, and attempt to answer, include the following: What ancient sources of knowledge do we have about Jesus (both literary and archaeological)? How historically reliable are these sources? Can the Gospels of the New Testament be trusted to provide a historically accurate picture of Jesus' words and deeds? What methods have scholars devised for examining such ancient sources? Once these methods are applied, what can we say with relative certainty about the things that Jesus actually said and did?

### **Outline**

- I. Jesus of Nazareth is almost certainly the most important figure in the history of Western civilization, a man whose impact on the course of history is completely unparalleled.
  - A. His effect on secular history was not immediate. He was first known as an obscure Jewish teacher who was crucified for sedition.
    1. Within a century of his death, communities of followers had been established in all the major urban areas of the Mediterranean.
    2. Two centuries after that, he was known, and even worshiped, by some members of the aristocratic elite in the Roman Empire; The Emperor himself, Constantine, became a follower in the early fourth century AD.
    3. A century after that, the entire Empire was officially Christian. Christianity then became the central religion for virtually all of what became Europe and on into the New World.
    4. Throughout this period, from the early Middle Ages to today, the Christian church has exercised enormous political, economic, social, and cultural power—unlike any institution in the history of the West. At the beginning of it all is the man Jesus himself.

- B. The most obvious arena of Jesus' influence, of course, is in the religious lives of his followers.
    - 1. The latest demographic figures put the numbers of Christians, of all kinds, at well over a billion.
    - 2. Millions of people devote their lives to Jesus, to following his teachings and to emulating his example. Millions believe that both their present well being and their lives for all eternity are determined by what he did.
  - C. Even those who do not believe in him cannot escape Jesus' influence; his name, his life, and his teachings fill our culture, and nonbelievers think of him as one of the great moral teachers of the ages.
- II. You would think that a person who is this important would be well known. Nothing could be farther from the truth.
- A. Almost everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but the opinions are so much at odds with one another that they can't all be right.
  - B. Remarkably, the situation does not improve much when you move from the popular media to the world of scholarship. Books and articles of recent vintage on Jesus number 2,045, representing radically different conclusions. They can't all be right.
  - C. Why are there so many different opinions about this, the most important figure in the history of our form of civilization? Which view is most historically plausible? How can we possibly know?
    - 1. These are some of the basic questions that we will address in this course on the historical Jesus.
    - 2. In the rest of this introductory lecture, I'd like to indicate what our approach will be, outline the major components of our study, and provide a bit of important background information.
- III. In this course, we will take a strictly historical approach to the question of the historical Jesus.
- A. We could strive to understand Jesus from the perspective of faith.
    - 1. That is how most people do understand Jesus, because they want to know what to believe about him and they want to understand his significance for their lives and their relationships with God.
    - 2. Approaching our study from this religious perspective can present hidden difficulties. If we decide to approach the study of Jesus from the perspective of faith, then whose faith should it be?
    - 3. Also, if we approach the study of the historical Jesus strictly from the perspective of faith, then we will almost certainly end up where we started, because people almost always find what they expect to find if they allow their expectations to guide the search.
  - B. For these reasons, it might be better to take a different approach to our task, one that requires us to suspend our beliefs or disbeliefs about

Jesus to see what he was actually like, to see what he really said and did.

1. This *historical*, as opposed to *religious*, approach to the study does not claim to be better than a religious approach.
2. This approach does not require that we disbelieve, only that we do not allow our beliefs to determine our historical conclusions.
3. A historical approach is interested in examining historical evidence. It does not mean that historians cannot be believers.

IV. The course will be roughly divided into two parts. The first part deals with what our sources of information about the historical Jesus are; the second part deals with what these sources can reveal to us when we examine them following solid historical criteria.

- A. First, we will consider all the surviving sources from antiquity that can help reconstruct what Jesus said and did.
  1. The principal sources of information about Jesus are the Gospels of the New Testament. We will begin our investigation by determining how reliable these accounts are for reconstructing Jesus' life by asking—and answering—a number of questions.
  2. We will then consider other sources from outside the New Testament, for example, a couple of dozen other Gospels that record words and deeds of Jesus. We will also look at what other ancient people—non-Christian Jews and pagans—had to say about Jesus to see if they can assist us in rounding out the picture.
  4. We will then discuss the task of using these sources for historical purposes, considering the kinds of methods that scholars have developed.
- B. Second, we will apply the methods we have discussed to the sources that have survived to see what they can reveal to us about Jesus.
  1. My thesis will not sound at all peculiar to those who are familiar with twentieth-century scholarship on the historical Jesus.
  2. Since the early part of the century, when the great humanitarian and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer wrote *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, scholars have widely considered Jesus to be a kind of Jewish apocalyptic prophet. He anticipated that God was soon going to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom on earth.
  3. I will try to show why this point of view has been so popular among so many scholars for so long and then will discuss what Jesus actually taught and recount the most important events of Jesus' life, those surrounding his crucifixion.
  5. I will conclude the course by discussing how the apocalyptic words and deeds of Jesus have affected his followers down through the ages, until today.

- V. Throughout our investigation, you will see that I consider evidence to be an important consideration in trying to reconstruct a person from the past.
- A. Some other scholars of the historical Jesus don't share my view of evidence. They discuss their views at great lengths in their books but never indicate how they know what they claim to know.
  - B. Establishing what happened in the past isn't a matter of guessing—it's a matter of evidence. If you are reading the results of a rigorous examination of evidence, you have a right to see what that evidence is.
  - C. In this course, I'll not simply regale you with my views of who Jesus was but will go to some length to explain what the evidence is. If you disagree with my conclusions, you'll be able to examine the evidence for yourself and decide where I've gone wrong in interpreting it.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 1.

Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus*, chap. 5.

Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- 1. Some people maintain that it is impossible to study Jesus without believing in him. Do you think this is true? Is it true for other areas of academic study? Is it possible, for example, to study Buddhism without being a Buddhist? Or the Dialogues of Socrates without being a Platonist? Or communism without being a Marxist?
- 2. It would be useful at the outset of this course for you to be clear in your own mind what you already think about Jesus' life and teachings. You might want to jot down a couple of notes along these lines, to compare with what you've come to think by the time the course is completed.

## Lecture Two

### One Remarkable Life

**Scope:** It is difficult to know where to begin the study of the historical Jesus—with the first Gospel of the New Testament, the first book of the New Testament to be written, the first Gospel to be written, or somewhere else? In some ways it makes best sense to begin not with the New Testament at all, but with the world in which the Christian religion was born, a world largely populated by “pagans.”

One of the leading questions to deal with at the outset of a study of Jesus is whether the Christian view that Jesus was both divine and human derives from the circumstance that stories were told about him in the pagan environment. Is it possible that former pagans who converted to belief in Jesus portrayed him in terms that they were already familiar with, as one who was more than mortal? If so, how can we get behind the developing doctrine about Jesus as a kind of “divine man” to see what he was really like in history? That will be one of the objectives of this course of study.

### Outline

- I. In investigating the historical Jesus, we must first ask where to start.
  - A. The Gospels are a logical starting point.
    1. We could start with the first Gospel of the New Testament, Matthew. Even though Matthew is the first book to occur in the New Testament, however, it was not the first written.
    2. The first books written were actually by the apostle Paul, to whom are ascribed thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and who wrote ten or fifteen years before the Gospels.
    3. As we will see later in the course, Paul does not record a good deal of information about the words and deeds of Jesus.
  - B. Maybe we should begin with the earliest Gospel to be written, which most scholars agree was the Gospel of Mark. But Mark was written several decades after Jesus lived; most scholars date it to AD 65–70 (Jesus probably died around AD 30).
- II. I’ve decided that the best place to begin our study is by summarizing for you the life of a remarkable man who lived nearly 2,000 years ago.
  - A. The accounts of his life may sound familiar to you.
    1. Before he was born, his mother knew he would not be a normal child. An angelic visitor told her that her son would be divine.
    2. His birth was accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders and as a child, he was religiously precocious.

3. As an adult, he left home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry, teaching his good news that people should live for what is spiritual, not the material things of this world.
  4. He gathered disciples and did miracles to confirm them in their faith.
  5. He raised the ire of many of those in power, who had him brought up on charges before the Roman authorities.
  6. Even after he left this world, though, his followers claimed that he had ascended to heaven and that they had seen him alive afterwards. They wrote books about his life, and some of these writings still survive today.
  7. I doubt if any of you has ever read them, and I doubt if many of you have even heard the name of the man I've been describing: Apollonius of Tyana. He was a famous neo-Pythagorean philosopher of the first century AD, a worshiper of pagan gods, whose life and teachings are recorded for us in the writings of his later follower Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.
- B. Apollonius lived at about the same time as Jesus, although they never knew each other. Their followers, though, knew each other and had heated debates about who was superior.
- C. These were not the only two men believed to be divine. Jesus may be the only miracle-working Son of God that we know about in our world, but he was not at all the only one talked about in his world.

III. It is important to begin our study of Jesus with some sense of the context in which the early Christians told stories about him.

- A. As we'll see later, the Gospel writers seem to have inherited their stories about Jesus from a rich oral tradition about him.
1. The Gospels are anonymous, even though there are traditional names for the purported authors.
  2. Scholars are fairly unanimous that they were written some decades after Jesus' death: Mark, AD 65–70; Matthew and Luke, AD 80–85; and John, AD 90–95.
  3. These books, as with all the books of the New Testament, were written in Greek, even though Jesus, as a Palestinian Jew, would have spoken Aramaic.
  4. Because most Christians, even in the first century, were probably non-Jews—i.e., they were converted from being “pagans”—it would be worth learning about typical pagan beliefs to understand how the stories about Jesus might have been modified by Christians who told them. Note that “pagan” is not a derogatory term for historians; it simply means someone who is neither Jewish nor Christian.
- B. Even though pagan religions were highly diversified, we can say the following about all of them: they were polytheistic and used sacrifices

to placate the gods; they had no particular creed or system of ethics that had to be believed as a matter of religion; and they were not scriptural religions, nor were they exclusive as to which god or gods one could or should worship.

- C. For the most part, pagans did not see their gods as jealous or in competition with one another. They understood the realm of the gods as a kind of pyramid of power and authority with some kind of supreme deity at the top and the great gods below him followed by local deities, then family and personal deities .
  - 1. Below them were other kinds of local deities, who still were unbelievably powerful from the human perspective, followed by family and personal deities and then lesser beings (*daimonia*).
  - 2. Finally, were demi-gods, that is, humans who were half mortal and half divine.

IV. We should be aware that pagan beliefs about partially divine humans may have influenced early pagan converts to Christianity.

- A. In the next lecture, we will consider this question further. At this point, to stimulate your thinking, I'd like to note a couple of interesting points from our surviving Gospels.
- B. As I've indicated, Mark was the first Gospel to be written. As we'll see, compelling reasons exist to believe that Luke used Mark as one of his sources for writing his account some 10–15 years later.
  - 1. For the purposes of our brief comparison here, I'd like to point out how these Gospels begin and end. Mark (the shortest of the Gospels) begins with references to the Jewish prophets, includes the account of Jesus' baptism as an adult by John the Baptist, and ends with his women followers going to his tomb to learn that he has been raised from the dead.
  - 2. The emphasis in Mark is on the "Son of God," a term used to describe an individual or group of people who mediate God's will on earth. The Son of God is not a divine being.
  - 3. Luke, by comparison, begins with accounts of Jesus' miraculous birth to a mother who is a virgin and ends with a description of Jesus' ascending into heaven.
  - 4. Is it an accident that the later account—written after the stories about Jesus had been in circulation for a longer time among former pagans—is the one that portrays Jesus more in line with what pagans typically thought about divine men?
- C. John's Gospel was written even later and also makes for an interesting comparison with Mark.
  - 1. Scholars do not think that John used Mark (or Luke) as one of his sources. Like Mark, John does not narrate a virgin birth or ascension.

2. The difference in the way Jesus is portrayed between John and Mark, though, is striking.
  3. In Mark, Jesus is clearly God's favored one, his son, whom God empowers to do miracles and who dies for the sins of the world. But he is portrayed as completely human in every way. He never talks about himself as divine, and no one identifies him as being God—not even Mark himself.
  4. Contrast that with Jesus' portrayal in John, which begins by identifying Jesus as the Word of God, who was responsible for the creation of the universe, who is called God both by the author and by others in the Gospel (e.g., 21:25), and who says himself that he is completely equal with God (10:30).
  5. Again, is it an accident that the earliest of our Gospels portrays Jesus as human and the latest portrays him as God?
- D. It has commonly been noted that as time goes on, Christians begin to portray Jesus in increasingly exalted terms.
1. In Mark, he is a human who is called God's son, probably much like other humans (e.g., the ancient kings of Israel, like Solomon [2 Sam 7:14], were called God's sons when they were used by God to mediate his will to earth).
  2. In Luke, Jesus appears to be a kind of divine human, whose father is not a mortal but God himself (1:35). In Mark, the assumption seems to be that Joseph is Jesus' father; there is no account of his virgin birth.
3. In John, as we have seen, Jesus is equal with God. But that's not the same as saying that he was identical with God. Later Christians made this claim, leading, in the fourth century, to such formulations as the Nicene Creed, in which Jesus is affirmed as being fully divine and fully human at one and the same time.
5. Is it possible that this is a later formulation, one that had its roots after Jesus' life and the early development of which can already be seen in the Gospels?

### Essential Reading:

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*.

Cartlidge and Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels*, parts 2 and 3 (the third part contains extracts from Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*).



**Suggested Reading:**

Ferguson, *Religions of the Roman Empire*.

Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Part I (on pagans).

Shelton, *As the Romans Did*.

Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Based on what we have already seen, how does it seem to you that the date of a source for the life of Jesus should affect its value for reconstructing what he was really like?
2. Why is it that no one today seems to know the stories about “divine-men” such as Apollonius of Tyana? Are these stories irrelevant for understanding the stories about Jesus? If not, why are they not discussed at all?

## Lecture Three

### Scholars Look at the Gospels

**Scope:** Scholars investigating the Gospels of the New Testament have understood them in a number of different ways over the years. Before the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, almost all scholars took the Gospels to be historically accurate accounts of supernatural events. With the Enlightenment and its emphasis on natural law and the power of human reason and its distrust of traditional authority and the notion of divine intervention, the Gospels came to be seen as records of natural events that were wrongly perceived to be miraculous by the early followers of Jesus.

Both ways of looking at the Gospels came under attack with the monumental work of David Friedrich Strauss. Strauss argued that the Gospels are not historical in either the supernatural or natural sense, but rather contain myths—history-like stories that intend to convey a truth but never happened. Even though few scholars today would subscribe to Strauss's precise notion of "myth," most believe that the Gospel accounts do contain stories about Jesus that are historically inaccurate—in that they cannot have happened as described—but that nonetheless are designed to reveal the "truth" about him.

### Outline

- I. Did Christians in later times, including the authors of the Gospels, begin to see Jesus as divine in some sense, whereas in earlier periods—including during Jesus' own life—he was not seen that way?
  - A. Let me stress again that I am not talking about the importance of the Gospels for issues of faith, but only about their importance for knowing what Jesus was really like.
  - B. We must start with a fuller understanding of our earliest sources for knowing about Jesus, the Gospels of the New Testament. We'll look at these books in general terms and ask what kind of documents they are.
  - C. First, I'll give a brief history of scholarship on the question, discussing three different ways of thinking about the Gospels. The discussion will be chronological, but I emphasize that all three ways of understanding the Gospels are still represented by some readers today.

- II. Before the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, virtually everyone understood the Gospels to be *supernatural histories*, records of things that actually happened, but that were mostly supernatural. Here are three examples.
- A. All four Gospels have an account of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13).
  - B. A second example is Jesus’ “walking on the water,” a miracle that included, according to Matthew (14:24–33), Simon Peter walking on the water as well.
  - C. Finally, consider the biggest miracle of all: After dying and being buried, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to his disciples as the Lord of Life.
- III. Starting with the Enlightenment, some scholars started seeing the Gospels not as supernatural histories but as *natural histories*.
- A. The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the eighteenth century involved a new way of thinking and looking at the world.
    - 1. Intellectuals of the Enlightenment came to distrust traditional sources of authority and started to insist on the power of human reason to understand the world and the human’s place in it.
    - 2. This was an age of science and development of modern technology. Scholars began to assert the “logic” and importance of cause–effect relationships. They developed scientific notions of “natural law,” i.e., highly predictable ways that nature worked, along with the concomitant view that these “laws” could not be broken by any outside agency (for example, a divine being).
    - 3. These intellectuals modified the grounds of human knowledge—away, for example, from the traditional teachings and dogmas of the church to such “objective” processes as rational observation, empirical verification, and logical inference.
    - 4. In terms of religious belief, scholars of the Enlightenment recognized that in earlier times, people had naively appealed to divine agency to explain natural phenomena that seemed mysterious.
  - B. A number of biblical scholars were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and took a rationalistic view of the Gospels.
    - 1. According to these scholars, the miracles of the Bible obviously didn’t happen.
    - 2. For such scholars, the Gospels do not contain historical accounts of actual supernatural events, but rather historical events that were completely natural but were misperceived to be miraculous.

C. One of the famous rationalist interpreters of the Bible was a German theologian named Heinrich Paulus, author of a famous study called *Das Leben Jesu* (*Life of Jesus*, 1827).

1. In the so-called “feeding of the multitudes,” Paulus wrote that everyone saw Jesus break bread and immediately brought out their own picnic baskets. Only later did someone look back on the event and consider it to be a miracle.
2. In the account of Jesus walking on water, Paulus notes that the event allegedly took place at night during a storm and maintains that the disciples rowing against the wind had never gotten their boat far from land. When Jesus appeared to be walking out to them, he was just wading along the shore, much to the amazement of his disciples who thought they were in the middle of the lake.
3. As for the resurrection of Jesus, Paulus notes that the ancient Jewish historian Josephus mentions two of his own companions who survived crucifixion. Paulus believes this is also what happened to Jesus.

D. Paulus’s explanations for the miracles of the Gospels may seem fairly outlandish to us today, but for many people of the Enlightenment, they made a lot of sense.

IV. A major shift in the way of looking at the Gospels came in the years 1835–36 with the publication of a two-volume book by the famous German theologian David Friedrich Strauss called (in its English translation by George Eliot) *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*.

A. This erudite and compelling book had nearly 1,500 pages of detailed and meticulous argument involving every story in the Gospels. In it, Strauss disagreed with both of the prevailing ways of understanding the Gospels in his time.

1. On the one hand, he agreed with the rationalists who said that miracles don’t happen and that, as a consequence, the Gospels can’t be literally true in their depictions.
2. On the other hand, he found the “enlightened” natural explanations of the Gospel narratives ludicrous and thought that rationalists like Paulus were completely off base.
3. For Strauss, the Gospels contain neither supernatural histories nor natural histories. Instead, they contain myths.

B. Strauss did not mean “myth” in the way most of us think of the term.

1. Today, most people understand a “myth” to be something that isn’t true. For Strauss it was just the opposite. A myth *was* “true,” but it didn’t happen.
2. More precisely, for Strauss, a myth is a history-like (yet fictional) story that is meant to convey a religious truth. For Strauss, the Gospels are full of this kind of story.

C. The best way to understand how Strauss's view works is to take an example: Jesus' walking on water.

1. The supernaturalist view cannot explain how the event could have happened without denying that Jesus had a real human body, because human bodies have more "specific gravity" (as Strauss calls it) than water and, therefore, will sink. But if Jesus didn't have a real body, then he wasn't a real human—and that, Strauss points out, is one of the earliest heresies of early Christianity, known as *docetism*.
2. The naturalist view of Paulus is scarcely any better, because it ignores what the text actually says. For example, the Gospels say that the boat was in the middle of the lake, not that the disciples thought it was. Paulus has to change the text to explain it, and that doesn't seem to be a very safe approach to interpretation.
3. The supernatural interpretation can't explain the text, and the natural explanation ignores the text. According to Strauss, both modes of interpretation err, because both of them see the story as a historical account. In fact, Jesus' walking on the water is not an actual historical event but a myth—a history-like story that is trying to convey a truth.
4. Early Christians, Strauss noted, likened the trials and tribulations of this life to a stormy sea that threatens life and limb. Only Jesus can rise above these forces. Thus, for Strauss, the story of walking on the water was a myth, meant to reveal the truth that Jesus can help his followers overcome the obstacles of their lives.

V. A lot has happened in biblical scholarship since Strauss published his *Life of Jesus* in 1836, but one thing has remained constant. Many scholars—for most of this century, the vast majority of critical scholars—think that Strauss was right, not in all or even most of the specific things he said, but in the general view he propounded. The Gospels contain stories that did not happen historically as narrated but are meant to convey truths.

- A. Few scholars today would follow Strauss in calling these stories "myths." The term is too loaded even still, and for most readers, it conveys precisely the wrong connotations.
- B. The notion that the Gospel accounts are not completely accurate but still important for the religious truths they try to convey is widely shared in the scholarly world, even though it's not so widely known or believed outside of it.
- C. In the next lecture, I'll begin to present the evidence that scholars have found to be convincing of this view. Before doing so, though, I want to answer the more basic question of whether a story *can* be "true" if it didn't happen.
  1. People don't usually talk this way, e.g., when we ask if a movie is a "true story."

2. We do tell stories that didn't happen to convey a "truth."
3. Consider the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which we know is not a historical account. We tell our children this story to emphasize something about our country (e.g., that it is—or at least should be—rooted in honesty) and about personal morality (you shouldn't lie even if it means getting in trouble).
4. Do the Gospels contain that kind of story? That will be the subject of our next lecture.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Apocalyptic Jesus*, chap. 2.

Tatum, *Quest of Jesus*, chap. 5.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Strauss, *Life of Jesus*.

Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Discuss the relationship between "stories" and "truth." In what way does a story need to be historically accurate to be true? What other kinds of truth can there be besides historical truth? How would it affect your own understanding of the New Testament if you became convinced that some of its stories didn't really happen?
2. Do you think "myth" is a good term to use of Gospel accounts that try to convey a truth but are not historically accurate (if such accounts exist)? Why or why not?

## Lecture Four

### Fact and Fiction in the Gospels

**Scope:** Scholars have come to believe that some of the stories of Jesus' life in the New Testament Gospels are historically inaccurate, not out of a desire to call into question the validity of the Christian religion (many of these scholars are committed Christians), but because compelling evidence exists to do so. The evidence is of two kinds: (1) some of the accounts are told in more than one Gospel and, when these are compared with one another, clear discrepancies emerge and (2) some of the accounts are implausible when looked at with a careful eye to what we otherwise know about history.

In neither case can the evidence be considered in the abstract but only by examining particular narratives in close detail. This lecture will consider the divergent accounts of Jesus' death in Mark and John and of his birth in Matthew and Luke. In each instance, we will try to locate places where the authors agree and disagree and to see, then, if any of these differences are irreconcilable; moreover, we will ask if there are any completely implausible aspects of their accounts. In the end, we will see that the Gospels seem to contain stories that cannot have happened as narrated but are nonetheless meant to reveal some kind of Christian "truth" about Jesus.

### Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we saw that for most of two centuries, scholars have maintained that the Gospels contain stories that are trying to convey "truths" about Jesus but are not historically accurate.
  - A. This consensus among scholars doesn't necessarily make it true; we need to look at the surviving evidence, in this case, from the Gospels themselves. As we will see, compelling reasons exist for thinking that the Gospels contain stories that cannot be historically accurate—at least, historically accurate as they are narrated.
  - B. In this lecture, we will look at two of the major kinds of this evidence.
    1. Some stories are told by more than one Gospel and, often, these accounts contain discrepancies; these discrepancies indicate that the stories were changed at some point and that they both cannot be accurate.
    2. Some of the stories are implausible in light of what we already know about the ancient world. Here, I'm not referring to "miracles", but to other events that are narrated but do not appear to be historically plausible.

- C. The only way to evaluate this kind of evidence is to conduct a detailed analysis of specific accounts, viz., two examples drawn from the stories of Jesus' birth and death.

**II.** The accounts of Jesus' death in our earliest (Mark) and latest (John) Gospels are difficult to reconcile.

- A. As you can see by reading the accounts (Mark chapters 14–15; John chapters 18–19), the basic story line is the same in both Gospels. Both have the same cast of characters and basic narrative of events, ending in Jesus' crucifixion.
- B. The accounts also contain striking differences, which may or may not be historical discrepancies. Let's examine further.
  - 1. For example, in Mark's account (chapter 15), Jesus, Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the crowds are all in one place. The trial is very short, and Jesus speaks only two words (translated into English as "you say so," when asked if he is the king of the Jews).
  - 2. In John's account (chapter 16), the Jewish leaders refuse to enter Pilate's residence, because they do not want to become ceremonially defiled (we're not told why they would be) and so prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening. As a result, Pilate moves back and forth between Jesus, who is inside, and his accusers, who are outside. Jesus, rather than being silent for most of the proceeding, delivers several speeches to his judge.
  - 3. In theory, one could argue that both accounts are accurate insofar as they go. Mark simply didn't indicate that Jesus' judge and accusers were in different locations and that Jesus gave several longer replies to Pilate's questions.
- D. Other differences, though, are hard to reconcile. In particular, there is a discrepancy over when the event takes place. The timing of the event may seem like a small detail, but we must think of historical evidence as if it were evidence at an accident or a crime scene where we're trying to figure out what happened.
  - 1. In this instance, the clue has to do with a simple question: When did Jesus die?
  - 2. To answer the question, I need to provide some historical background, then look carefully at each account.
- D. Both Mark and John indicate that Jesus died during the Feast of the Passover, the annual festival celebrated by Jews in Jerusalem to commemorate the deliverance of God's people Israel from slavery in Egypt, as recorded in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.
  - 1. In Jesus' day, the festival was a major event. Jews came from around the world to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem.
  - 2. They would arrive a week in advance to undergo a ritual of purification that would allow them to eat the meal. Then, the afternoon before the meal, they would bring a lamb—which was to



- be eaten as part of the celebration—to the Temple (or else the lamb would be purchased there) to be sacrificed by the priests.
3. The rest of the day was spent in preparing the meal and was called the “Day of Preparation for the Passover.” Remember that in Jewish reckoning, a new day begins, not at midnight, as for us, but when it gets dark. (Even today, Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening at dark and continues through Saturday, until it gets dark again.)
  6. After the lambs were sacrificed and their blood was drained, they were given back to the Jewish worshipers, who took them home to cook. The meal was eaten after it got dark, that is, on the day of Passover itself. The meal consisted of several symbolic foods to recall Israel’s slavery in Egypt and the deliverance by God.
- E. We are now ready to compare our two accounts in detail; both accounts give us a precise description of when, in relationship to the Passover meal, Jesus was crucified. We begin with the earlier account, Mark’s.
1. The day before his arrest, Jesus’ disciples ask him where they are to prepare the Passover meal (Mark 14:12) and he gives them instructions. This then is the Day of Preparation for the Passover.
  2. That night, they have the meal, in which Jesus takes the symbolic foods and instills them with new significance.
  3. Afterwards, Jesus goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, is handed over to the Jewish authorities, and spends the night in jail.
  4. The next morning—i.e., the morning of Passover, the day after the lambs were slain and the Passover meal had been eaten—he appears before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty of criminal charges and orders him executed.
  5. Jesus is taken off and crucified at 9:00 a.m. (Mark 15:25).
- F. This dating of the event stands in stark contrast with what we find in John (chapters 18–19).
1. Here, too, Jesus has a last meal with his disciples, but there’s no word of it being a Passover meal. In this Gospel, the disciples never ask where they are to prepare Passover, and Jesus does not speak about the symbolic foods in a new way.
  2. After supper, Jesus goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas, is arrested, and spends the night in jail. The next day he appears before Pilate.
  3. As we have seen, we’re told that the Jewish leaders who were his accusers refuse to enter Pilate’s residence, because they do not want to become ritually defiled and so prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening (18:28). Eat the Passover meal? Hadn’t they already done that the night before?
  4. The problem is clarified at the end of Jesus’ trial, when we’re told exactly when he was condemned and led off to be executed: John

19:14—"And this was on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, at 12:00 noon."

5. How could it be the Day of Preparation for the Passover? According to Mark, Jesus lived through that day, had the Passover meal with his disciples that night, and was put on the cross the next morning, on the day of Passover itself. In John's Gospel, though, Jesus was executed before the meal even began.

G. It is probably impossible to reconcile this discrepancy between John and the Synoptic Gospel account. We can, however, explain why the discrepancy came about.

1. The Gospel of John is the only Gospel of the New Testament that explicitly identifies Jesus himself as "the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29, 36). This is also the only Gospel in which Jesus is said to die on the afternoon of the day before the Passover, precisely when the lambs were being slaughtered.
2. To most scholars, it appears that John has changed a historical fact to make a theological point: that Jesus really was the Lamb of God.
3. This is one kind of evidence to suggest that the Gospels contain some accounts that cannot be historically accurate, at least in all their details.

III. The stories of Jesus' birth in our two other Gospels, Matthew and Luke, are also historically problematic.

A. Again, the two accounts have broad similarities. In both, Jesus is born to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem.

B. Again the two accounts also have numerous differences. In this case, the differences number more than the similarities; although, again, a number of the differences are not actual discrepancies.

1. Luke alone indicates that Joseph and Mary had come to Bethlehem to register for a census because—during the days of the Syrian governor Quirinius—Caesar Augustus had decreed that "the whole world" (presumably, the Roman Empire) should be taxed. Everyone, therefore, needed to register at their ancestral homes (for Joseph, Bethlehem). Jesus just happened to be born while they were there. Matthew says nothing about any of this.
2. Luke alone mentions the shepherds who come to worship the infant Jesus; Matthew alone mentions the wise men who followed the star that stood over the house where he lay.
3. Matthew alone mentions the wrath of King Herod, who learns of the child and sets out to destroy it by slaughtering every child who is two years old and under in Bethlehem. Matthew alone indicates that Joseph and Mary escaped in time by fleeing to Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died, then returned—only to relocate in Nazareth to avoid the wrath of Herod's son, who was now ruling.

4. These differences may be puzzling—virtually all the stories in Luke are found only in Luke and all the stories in Matthew are found only in Matthew—but they are not necessarily contradictory.
- C. Some of the differences, though, do appear to represent actual discrepancies.
1. Where, for example, was Joseph and Mary's hometown originally? Was it Nazareth, as in Luke, or Bethlehem, as in Matthew? Notice that the wise men find Jesus in a house in Matthew—no word of a temporary residence outside the inn. When Joseph and Mary return from Egypt, where do they initially plan to go? Bethlehem, of course.
  2. Were Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem just for a temporary visit (as in Luke), or was that their home (Matthew)? Notice that, according to Matthew, Herod has every male child under the age of two murdered; presumably, then, the wise men had been on the road for a long time and Jesus was no longer an infant.
  3. If Joseph and Mary really fled to Egypt (as in Matthew), how is it that they returned immediately to Nazareth just thirty days after Jesus was born (as in Luke, that is, after the thirty-day period of purification)?
- D. In addition, certain aspects of these accounts strike historians as completely implausible. Consider just Luke's account.
1. We have relatively good documentation for the reign of Caesar Augustus, but no mention in any source of a worldwide census.
  2. Moreover, how *could* such a census be taken, in which everyone registered at the homes of their distant ancestors? How would they know where to go? Imagine the mass migrations. How is it that no source from the time even bothered to mention it?
  3. Finally, we know from other sources—the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historian Tacitus, and some inscriptions—that despite Luke's account, Quirinius was not governor of Syria during the reign of King Herod in Palestine but ten years later.
- E. It appears, then, that these accounts could not have happened as narrated. Ultimately, these stories are probably not to be read as objective accounts of history but as trying to make a point.
1. Both want to emphasize that even though Jesus came from Nazareth, he was born in Bethlehem. Why? No doubt because the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, said that the future ruler of Israel would come from there (Micah, 5:2).
  2. Both want to emphasize that Jesus was an extraordinary person from the beginning. Evidence? For both authors, his mother was a virgin.
  3. These stories, in other words, are trying to convey ideas about Jesus. But when looked at as historical sources for what really happened, they appear to be inaccurate in places.

#### IV. The Gospels are full of that kind of story.

- A. We could look at many examples of discrepancies in the Gospels, but such an exercise would be neither fruitful nor interesting.
- B. Instead, it is better simply to accept the Gospels for what they are: documents that are trying to tell the "truth" about Jesus, even if that truth is not always based on events that actually happened.
- C. Let me be clear, though, that I'm not saying that every story in the Gospels is completely inaccurate.
  - 1. The Gospels no doubt do contain historically reliable material that will be of considerable use to us as we try to establish what Jesus really said and did.
  - 2. They also contain historically inaccurate material; part of our task will be deciding which is which.
  - 3. Before pursuing that task, though, we must learn more about these books, for instance, who their authors were and where they got their stories.

#### Essential Reading:

Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2; Mark 14–16; John 18–19.

Ehrman, *Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 3.

Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospels*.

#### Suggested Reading:

Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*.

Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*.

#### Questions to Consider:

- 1. Why do you suppose Matthew and Luke have such different stories about Jesus' birth? That is, why didn't one or both of them simply tell the *whole* story as we have it in the Christmas story told every year?
- 2. In anticipation of what we'll be doing later, how do you think we might get behind the contradictions of our sources to figure out what really happened in the life of Jesus? In other words, assuming that two sources are contradictory, how could we decide which, if either, is right?

## Lecture Five

### Traditions and Authors

**Scope:** The Gospels of the New Testament, although written anonymously, have been traditionally ascribed to two of Jesus' disciples, Matthew and John, and two companions of other apostles, Mark and Luke. These books were probably not written by eyewitnesses—they certainly don't claim to be. Even if they were based on eyewitness testimony, they would not necessarily be historically accurate.

The books seem to have been written thirty-five to sixty-five years after the events they narrate by highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians (unlike the lower-class, Aramaic-speaking disciples of Jesus). As two of the authors admit, they inherited the stories from the oral tradition.

Jesus' words and actions were principally passed on by word of mouth by people who were not eyewitnesses to the events and who had never laid eyes on any of the eyewitnesses. The stories about Jesus were changed to fit the new circumstances in which they were told. The Gospel writers also adapted these stories. One of the tasks of the historian is to move behind the accounts as they have been changed to see what they reveal about what Jesus himself actually said and did.

### Outline

- I. We have seen that the Gospels contain stories that didn't happen or, at least, that didn't happen as they are told.
  - A. Sometimes the surviving accounts contain clear discrepancies, such as discussed in Lecture Four, or are so highly implausible that historians agree that they cannot have happened as narrated (i.e., Luke's census).
  - B. We now need to move to the next step of trying to understand *why* the Gospels are this way.
- II. The titles of the Gospels name their authors as two of the disciples, Matthew (the tax collector) and John (the son of Zebedee), and two friends of the apostles, Mark (the secretary of Peter) and Luke (the traveling companion of Paul).
  - A. Scholars have reasons to doubt these traditional ascriptions.
    1. If Matthew actually wrote a book about Jesus' words and deeds, he most likely would have called it something like "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" or "The Life and Death of Our Savior." Whoever labels this text the "Gospel according to Matthew" is trying to explain whose version of Jesus' story this one is.
    2. Moreover, we know that the original manuscripts of the Gospels did not have their authors' names attached to them.

- B. Even more significantly, none of the Gospels claims to be written by an eyewitness.
    - 1. For example, even though someone named Matthew is mentioned in Matt. 9:9, nothing in that verse indicates that he's the person writing the account. Furthermore, nowhere in the Gospel does the author indicate that he was personally involved in the events that are described.
    - 2. Even verse (21:24), indicates that the author was not the eyewitness, but based his account on the report of an eyewitness.
    - 3. In sum, the New Testament Gospels were written anonymously.
  - C. The earliest readers of the Gospels found their authors' names to be unimportant.
  - D. The first time an ascription can be found comes from about AD 120–30 in the writings of an obscure author named Papias.
    - 1. Papias claimed that the apostle Peter would speak about Jesus' words and deeds as the occasion demanded, and that Mark, his secretary, later wrote the stories down but "not in order." Papias said he received this information from an elderly Christian.
    - 2. Papias also claimed that the Matthew wrote the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew and that "everyone interpreted them as they could." He says nothing about Luke or John.
  - E. This tradition from Papias must be considered seriously, even though there is no way to know for sure, because Papias doesn't quote the Gospel of Mark.
    - 1. Still, Papias emphasizes that the author of the Gospel was not an eyewitness.
    - 2. The earliest we can trace this Mark tradition is to AD 110–120 (Papias's elderly informant)—that is, almost a half-century after Mark was written. There is no other supporting evidence.
    - 3. Papias tells us that Matthew's book comprised only "sayings" of Jesus (our Matthew contains a lot more than that) and it was written in Hebrew (not Greek, as our version came down to us). Papias does not appear, therefore, to be referring to this book.
  - F. Apart from this tradition in Papias, we don't hear anything about the identity of the writers until near the end of the second century AD.
- III. Scarcely any other solid information is available about the Gospel writers, but we can deduce several pieces of useful intelligence.
- A. As mentioned earlier, the books appear to have been produced sometime between AD 65–95. On this, almost all historians agree.
  - B. All four Gospels are written in Greek by authors who were obviously literate and reasonably well educated

1. A recent study by William Harris places the literacy rate in the Roman world at fifteen percent at most. In contrast, all four of these authors seem to be highly educated.
  2. We know from the New Testament that Jesus' followers were mainly lower-class peasants, who spoke Aramaic, not Greek. Two of the leaders among Jesus' followers, Peter and John, are said to be "illiterate" (Acts 4:13).
  3. It seems unlikely that these disciples of Jesus played decisive roles in the literary compositions that are ascribed to them.
  4. Because the books were written in Greek, not Aramaic, they appear to have been written outside of Palestine, although some scholars would locate Mark, and even Matthew, in Galilee, where Greek was spoken. Scholars continue to call these books Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John purely as a matter of convenience.
- IV. The next step in figuring out why the Gospels are the way they are—with a mixture of historically accurate and historically inaccurate materials—is to ask where these anonymous Greek-speaking authors got their information.
- A. Three of the sources we've already considered—Luke, John, and Papias—indicate that the Gospels were based on reports handed down, either orally or in writing, from earlier Christians and that ultimately these reports went back to eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1–4).
  - B. Before considering the oral transmission of these stories, we should think about the implications of the idea that the accounts go back to eyewitnesses.
    1. Consider any two eyewitness accounts of a particular event: Are they *ever* exactly the same?
    2. Suppose eyewitnesses did not bother to write down their accounts immediately, but waited twenty or thirty years. Even worse, suppose the stories were not written by the eyewitnesses themselves but by people to whom they told their stories.
    3. The point is that even stories based on eyewitness accounts are not necessarily reliable, and the same is true a hundred-fold for accounts that have been in oral circulation long after the fact, even if ultimately stemming to reports of eyewitnesses.
- V. Now we should consider the implications of the fact that, as three of our earliest accounts attest, the stories in the Gospels were handed down by word of mouth and not written down until thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus' death.
- A. To understand the New Testament, we must realize that the most important events during those years involved the spread of the Christian church.
    1. Christianity started, immediately after Jesus' death, with a handful of his followers, perhaps twenty or thirty people located in Jerusalem, if we go by the Acts of the Apostles.

2. Within forty or fifty years, this tiny band of disciples had multiplied many times over in major urban areas throughout the Mediterranean. Still, individual Christian communities were generally small.
  3. In this age before mass media, Christians propagated the religion by word of mouth. They were trying to convert pagans by talking about Jesus' life and teachings.
  4. Given that the stories were told in different languages in different places over a huge geographical area, we are completely safe in saying that the stories were not told only by the original followers.
- B. I think we can assume that the stories got changed as they were told and retold by word of mouth, year after year.
1. Sometimes the changes would have been accidental as the stories were told for fifty years, in different countries, using different languages, among thousands of people.
  2. Sometimes people telling the stories may have wanted to change them to make a point, to promote faith in Jesus.
- C. Some standard objections are raised to the idea that the stories about Jesus were changed as they circulated by word of mouth throughout the Empire. Many people—somewhat unreflectively—assume that stories couldn't have been changed in such a relatively short amount of time, especially when eyewitnesses were around to verify the accounts.
1. Stories can change overnight, as anyone who has ever been in the news industry can readily attest.
  2. Eyewitnesses often disagree among themselves about crucial points (cf., our own courts of law).
  3. Almost no one who was telling these stories could have checked with eyewitnesses, even if they had wanted to, given the limited communications in the ancient world.
  4. The idea that the stories were changed is not a bit of scholarly speculation; we have hard evidence for it.
- D. The most common objection to the notion that stories about Jesus were changed in the process of transmission is that people living in oral cultures had better memories than most of us.
1. Anthropological studies of the past twenty years have shown convincingly that this isn't the case at all. In fact, the concern for verbal accuracy is found exclusively in written cultures, where accounts can be checked to see if they are consistent.
  2. In oral cultures the natural assumption is that stories *are* to be changed, depending on the audience and the situation.



**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 3.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 3.

**Suggested Reading:**

Davies and Sanders, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 1.

Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Think of some examples from your own life when someone who was an eyewitness to a significant event got it completely wrong when they tried to describe it. How does your own experience with eyewitness accounts affect your view of the possibilities of being able to reconstruct the past with accuracy?
2. If the Gospels were written anonymously, why do you suppose later Christians attributed them to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

## Lecture Six

### Some of the Other Gospels

**Scope:** Having considered some of the problems involved in using the Gospels of the New Testament as completely reliable guides for establishing what Jesus said and did, we can now turn to a consideration of other sources that have come down to us from antiquity. Numerous other Gospels from outside the New Testament allegedly report Jesus' words and deeds. In this lecture and the next one, we will consider several of these other Gospels.

On the whole, the non-canonical Gospels are late (second through eighth centuries AD) and legendary. Most of them were forged in the names of companions of Jesus. Many of them used the canonical Gospels as sources for their own accounts. Some of the earliest ones may, in theory, provide us with additional information about what happened during Jesus' life. In this lecture, we will examine the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, probably the earliest surviving account of Jesus' life as a young boy, and the Gospel of Peter, a fragmentary narrative of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection. These accounts are fascinating as pieces of early Christian literature, but their legendary character is evident even to a casual reader. They will not, therefore, be of much use when we later try to establish what Jesus said and did.

### Outline

- I. At this point, we will consider whether any other sources are available that might help us in our quest to discover what Jesus said and did.
  - A. We have a couple of dozen other Gospels not found in the New Testament, books written by Christians about the life and teachings of Jesus.
  - B. As a group, these Gospels have the following important features:
    1. As a rule, they are much later than the canonical Gospels; most of them date from the second to the eighth centuries.
    2. The only one that can make any claim to being contemporaneous with the New Testament Gospels is the newly discovered Gospel of Thomas, which we will consider in Lecture Seven.
    3. Unlike the anonymous Gospels of the New Testament, many of these Gospels are actually pseudonymous, claiming to be written by the apostles, or disciples, or Jesus' brother James, or his female companion, Mary Magdalene. All these books appear to be forged.
  - C. These non-canonical texts seem to have used the canonical Gospels, as well as oral traditions about Jesus.

1. The authors of the earliest of these surviving books, though, may not have known about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
  2. This fact can potentially make a book like the Gospel of Thomas particularly important for reconstructing Jesus' actual teachings, although most of the accounts are highly legendary.
- D. It is possible to categorize these Gospels as infancy Gospels, narrative Gospels, or sayings Gospels.
1. Infancy Gospels tell stories about Jesus' birth and childhood; many of them draw on the stories of Matthew and Luke.
  2. Narrative Gospels are like the Gospels of the New Testament in that they contain narrative accounts of the life and (sometimes) death of Jesus.
  3. Sayings Gospels principally contain collections of Jesus' teachings, often without any narrative context.
- II. The so-called "Infancy Gospel of Thomas" is one of the earliest non-canonical Gospels and almost certainly the earliest of the Infancy Gospels.
- A. Scholars debate when the book was written (there are very few internal clues), but some date it as early as the first half of the second century.
1. The book is attributed to a person named "Thomas," a word that means "twin."
  2. In some parts of early Christianity, it was believed that Jesus had a twin brother, Judas Thomas (fathered, possibly, by Joseph rather than God).
- B. If Jesus was a miracle-working son of God as an adult, what was he like as a child? It turns out that that the boy was a bit mischievous, according to this non-canonical account.
1. The Gospel begins with Jesus as a five-year-old, making clay sparrows by a stream on the Sabbath. When found to be violating the Law not to work on the Sabbath, Jesus miraculously destroys all evidence of malfeasance. He claps his hands and commands the sparrows to fly off; they immediately come to life and do so.
  2. Jesus is portrayed in his early years as more than a bit temperamental. When another child disturbs him at play or runs into him on the street, he curses him and withers him on the spot.
  4. When his teacher at school becomes exasperated with the boy and cuffs him on the head, Jesus speaks a word and strikes him dead.
  4. As time goes on, Jesus begins to use his powers for good.
  5. The account concludes with Jesus as a twelve-year-old in the Temple, surrounded by scribes and Pharisees who hear him teach and who bless Mary for the wonderful child she has brought into the world (a story borrowed from Luke 2).
- C. Clearly, as entertaining as it may be, the book will not be of much use to anyone who wants to know the historical facts of Jesus' life.

- III. A much more serious account of Jesus is found in the Gospel of Peter, a fragmentary account of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection, allegedly written by his disciple Simon Peter, one of the earliest examples of a non-canonical narrative Gospel.
- A. The text was discovered in 1886 in the tomb of a Christian monk in Egypt.
  - B. The existence of the book had been known before its discovery from the writings of Eusebius, the fourth-century author who is known as the "Father of Church History." His ten-volume book, *Ecclesiastical History*, provides us with a good deal of our information about Christianity in the first three centuries.
    - 1. According to Eusebius, the Gospel of Peter was read by one of the churches ruled over by the second-century bishop of Antioch, Serapion.
    - 2. When Serapion received a tip that the book presented a heretical view of Christ, he examined it and forbade its further use.
    - 3. We presume that what we have now in hand is this long-lost Gospel. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell from our sources.
    - 4. Moreover, what was discovered in 1886 was only a fragment of the original that starts and stops in the middle of a sentence.
  - C. The part of this Gospel that survives is in many ways similar to the passion accounts of the New Testament.
  - E. There are also striking differences from the New Testament accounts.
    - 1. Here "the Jews" are held to be even more liable for Jesus' death than in the New Testament Gospels. The Jewish instigators of the plot against Jesus know full well that they have sinned against God in condemning him.
    - 2. Jesus does not appear to suffer in this account (v. 10: "he was silent as if he felt no pain"). This description may have led to Serapion's condemnation of the book as espousing the ancient heresy of *docetism*, which claimed that Jesus did not have a real human body but only appeared to.
    - 3. Unlike the canonical Gospels, this Gospel contains an actual description of Jesus' resurrection. Two angels go into the tomb and come forth, with their heads reaching up to the sky, supporting Jesus between them, with his head stretching up above the sky. Behind them emerges the cross. A voice comes from heaven, asking if the gospel has been taken to those who are dead. The cross replies, "Yes."
  - E. These distinctive features point to a date for the writing of the Gospel of Peter in the second century.
    - 1. Christians had begun to hold the Jews completely accountable for Jesus' death at that time.

2. Docetic Christians at the time maintained that Jesus, as fully divine, could not have really suffered.
  3. The legendary details surrounding the resurrection appear to be later additions to the stories about Jesus.
- F. Whether this account had full access to the earlier Gospels of the New Testament and used those accounts remains an open question that different scholars answer differently.
1. This account has numerous similarities to the accounts found in the New Testament, especially Matthew.
  2. On the other hand, very few verbal similarities exist between the Gospel of Peter and the earlier accounts, which would be difficult to explain if Peter had used one or more of them as a source.
  3. In either event, it appears that the account is relatively early, again, like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, written perhaps during the first half of the second century.
- G. Despite its early dates, the accounts in Peter (like those in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas) appear to be highly legendary and of little use for us if we want to know the historical Jesus.

### Essential Reading:

"The Infancy Gospel of Thomas" and the "Gospel of Peter," in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 124–30.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 12.

Elliott, *The Apocryphal Jesus*.

### Suggested Reading:

Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, parts 1 and 2.

Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Read the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter and evaluate whether *any* of the traditions found there might be considered to be historically accurate. What kind of criteria would you use to make that judgment?
2. Does it seem strange to you that Christians would continue to fabricate stories about Jesus well into the second, third, and later centuries, making up accounts that obviously never happened? Why or why not? Does it seem strange that Christians would forge Gospels in the names of the apostles—i.e., write documents claiming to be the work of one of Jesus' closest earthly disciples or family members, knowing full well that they were not?

## Lecture Seven

### The Coptic Gospel of Thomas

**Scope:** One of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century is the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, discovered in Egypt. The documents represent books that were deemed “heretical” by the early church fathers; specifically, they present a *Gnostic* view of the world. Gnostics maintained that the material world was the evil creation of an inferior deity; the goal of religion was to escape the entrapment of this world by acquiring the necessary knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) for salvation. This knowledge was conveyed by a heavenly being who came from the divine realm into the transitory material world to provide redemption for the sparks of the divine imprisoned here.

The Gospel of Thomas, 114 randomly ordered sayings of Jesus, contains no narratives from Jesus’ life and nothing about his death and resurrection. These sayings are best understood in light of the Gnostic myth of the world, which we will cover in this lecture. Scholars debate the date of this document and its relationship to the New Testament.

### Outline

- I. We will focus on a source that was produced in the early history of Christianity and possibly, independently of the New Testament Gospels.
  - A. This is the now-famous Coptic Gospel of Thomas, without question, the most significant book from early Christianity uncovered in modern times.
  - B. The serendipitous discovery of this Gospel is a fascinating story.
    1. An Egyptian Bedouin, named Mohammed Ali, near the village of Nag Hammadi, found an earthenware jar containing thirteen leather-bound books
    2. Because he was under suspicion for a violent murder and was afraid that his house would be searched and the books, confiscated, Mohammed Ali gave them to a priest for safekeeping.
    3. Word got out, antiquities dealers bought the volumes and scholars eventually gathered them all to read, edit, translate, and publish them as “The Nag Hammadi Library.”
  - C. The “library” consists of thirteen leather-bound books, with fifty-two separate writings (i.e., they are anthologies of texts), written on papyrus
    1. The bound books have been reliably dated to the mid-fourth century AD, but the dates of some of the writings are much earlier, possibly as early as the first or second century AD; some are mentioned by Church Fathers who opposed them.

2. The books are all in Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language. They appear to be Coptic translations of Greek originals.
  3. The most famous of the books is the Gospel of Thomas; some scholars date its text to as early as the first century, possibly predating the writing of the Gospels of the New Testament. Most scholars prefer to date it to the first half of the second century.
- D. Different kinds of texts are represented in this library.
1. Some are Gospels, with very peculiar understandings of Jesus and his teachings—understandings rooted in an ancient form of “Gnosticism.” Other texts represent mythological reflections on how this material world came into being, sometimes in the forms of “revelations.”
  2. Others appear to be mystical poems celebrating the true nature of the spiritual world.
- E. Most scholars think that a fourth-century monk removed the books from the monastery library near the site where they were found. He may have considered the books heretical and wanted to be rid of them (but why didn’t he burn them then?), or safeguard them until they were again “permitted” to be read by authorities.
1. Around the time the books were produced, the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, made an official statement about which books could and could not be read in the churches (AD 367).
  2. Possibly the books were buried in anticipation that the tide of theological opinion would shift. When that never happened, they remained in the ground until 1945.
  3. This assumption would mean that whoever buried the books considered them to be sacred—possibly even sacred Scripture. This is particularly striking because the books are clearly Gnostic—a form of Christianity widely condemned as heretical.

### III. Before describing the nature of the Gnostic religion, I should give a basic description of the Gospel of Thomas itself.

- A. Unlike the fragmentary Gospel of Peter, discovered sixty years earlier, this particular Gospel is completely preserved. It has no narrative at all, no stories about anything that Jesus did, no references to his death and resurrection. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus.
- B. The sayings are not arranged in any recognizable order. Nor are they set in any context, except in a few instances in which Jesus is said to reply to a direct question of his disciples. Most of the sayings begin simply with the words, “Jesus said.”
1. In terms of genre, the book looks less like the New Testament Gospels and more like the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible.
  2. In fact, the opening statement indicates that the correct understanding of these sayings will provide more than wisdom; it

will bring eternal life: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down. And he said, 'The one who finds the meaning of these words will not taste death'" (Gosp. Thom., 1).

- D. The author of the book explicitly claims to be Didymus Judas Thomas.
  - 1. Both "Didymus" and "Thomas" are words that mean "twin" (the first is Greek, the second Semitic); Judas is his proper name.
  - 2. According to the ancient Syrian writing called the Acts of Thomas, he was a blood relation of Jesus, also mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 6:3). In other words, Didymus Judas Thomas was Jesus' twin brother.
- E. One way to think about this collection of sayings is to compare them to sayings we already know from the canonical Gospels.
  - 1. Many of the sayings in Thomas sound completely familiar, e.g., "Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven'" (Gosp. Thom., 54).
  - 2. Other sayings sound vaguely familiar, yet somewhat peculiar: "Jesus said, 'Let the one who seeks not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be troubled, and when he is troubled, he will marvel, and he will rule over the All'" (Gosp. Thom., 2).
  - 3. Other sayings in the Gospel of Thomas sound quite unlike anything known from the New Testament: "Jesus said '...On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you have become two, what will you do?'" (Gosp. Thom., 11
  - 4. The meanings of these sayings are in no way obvious, but can perhaps be understood in light of "Gnostics" beliefs.

IV. Gnosticism is a blanket term describing a wide range of religions that emerged in Mediterranean at about the same time as Christianity.

- A. Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, we had to rely on what the Gnostics' opponents said about them to know their beliefs.
- B. A careful reading of some of their own texts, along with the comments of their enemies, can give us a basic idea of their views.
  - 1. Gnostics believed that Matter was inherently evil; spirit was good.
  - 2. Some people in the world were pure matter and destined to die. Other people (i.e., the Gnostics) had a spark of the divine within them, but were entrapped in matter by the nefarious creator of this world, who was not the true God but an ignorant and far less powerful being, intent on bringing harm to the divine realm.
  - 3. The goal of the Gnostic religion was to free these sparks from this world, to allow them to return to their original spiritual home.
  - 4. Escape could come only by acquiring the knowledge (Greek: *gnosis* = knowledge) necessary for salvation. This knowledge came only from a divine emissary; to the Gnostics, Christ, was that divine being.



- V. Scholars debate whether the Thomas is best seen as a Gnostic Gospel.
- A. On the one hand, the book does not spell out the Gnostic myth of creation and redemption. Then again, neither do a number other Gnostic texts.
  - B. A large number of the sayings that may strike a first-time reader as altogether puzzling *do* make good sense when read in light of the basic Gnostic myth that I've just laid out.
  - C. Strikingly, this Gospel does not contain a word about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, but only his "secret: teachings.
  - D. Even though Thomas has some sayings that sound remarkably like those found in the New Testament Gospels, it does not appear that he used them as sources.
    - 1. Virtually no extensive parallels can be found in the actual wordings of the sayings and many of the sayings of the Synoptics, are left out of Thomas.
    - 2. Most scholars have concluded that this pseudonymous author knew a number of the sayings of Jesus and that he understood these sayings in a particular Gnostic way.
    - 4. He had heard these sayings, much as the other Gospel writers had, through the oral traditions that were circulating about Jesus.
    - 5. Because of the strong Gnostic leanings of some of these sayings, it seems likely that this work was written in the early second century. Because he appears to have written independently of the other Gospels, his account of Jesus' words—especially those that are not heavily influenced by the later Gnostic myth—can be of some use for us in deciding what Jesus said.

### Essential Reading:

"The Gospel of Thomas" in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 116–23.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 11.

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

### Suggested Reading:

Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, part 2.

Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Rudolph, *Gnosis*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what ways does Gnosticism, as I've described it in this lecture, seem to you to be like and unlike Christianity as it is more traditionally taught?
2. Read through the Gospel of Thomas and choose several sayings that strike you as especially peculiar. Now try to interpret them in light of the major tenets of Gnosticism laid out in this lecture.

## Lecture Eight

### Other Sources

**Scope:** Having considered all the Gospels from early Christianity that can plausibly be used to reconstruct the words and deeds of Jesus, we can now turn our attention to other sources that may provide useful information. Unfortunately, none of the other documents that still survives from antiquity offers extensive discussions of Jesus. Among all the pagan sources that come down to us from the century following Jesus' death, he is mentioned only twice—once by Pliny the Younger and once by Tacitus—and only in passing. The first-century Palestinian historian Flavius Josephus gives us a bit more information but, again, only enough to support the claims of the New Testament; that is, that Jesus was known as a teacher and doer of great deeds who acquired a faithful following but was crucified at the instigation of Jewish leaders under Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor.

Nor is there much additional information to be gleaned from the twenty-three other books of the New Testament outside of the Gospels, including the writings of Paul. We can consider one other canonical source—or rather, a hypothetical source—the lost document called “Q,” which was probably used by both Matthew and Luke as a source for many of their sayings of Jesus. Most scholars are reasonably confident that Q once existed, even though it is now no longer available; it is usually dated to a period somewhat before Mark, possibly in the 50s or 60s AD. Apart from these meager remains, no other sources exist that can assist us significantly in trying to reconstruct the words and deeds of Jesus.

### Outline

- I. We have concluded our survey of the surviving Gospel sources for reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus.
  - A. With the partial exception of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, the non-canonical Gospels do not provide us with much additional information to what is already found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
  - B. Even these canonical Gospels are problematic as historical sources (whatever their merits as inspirational documents of faith).
    1. They were written decades after the events they narrate by authors who were not eyewitnesses.
    2. The authors inherited their stories from the oral tradition, in which tales of Jesus' words and deeds had been in circulation for years and were altered in the process.

- C. We will consider the three kinds of other sources that we have: pagan (i.e., non-Jewish and non-Christian), Jewish, and canonical sources outside of the Gospels and restrict our search to sources written within a hundred years of Jesus' death (that is, up to AD 130).
- II. It is striking to note that scarcely any pagan sources are available that can help us reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus.
- A. From the first century AD, we have hundreds of documents written by pagan authors for all kinds of reasons, as well as numerous public inscriptions and a considerable archive of private letters.
  - B. In none of this extensive literary record is Jesus ever mentioned at all. As enormous an impact as Jesus has made on Western culture over the past 2,000 years, in his own day, his impact appears to have been practically nil.
  - C. Our earliest recorded references to Jesus in pagan sources come from the early second century, and only two certain references come from within our prescribed time limits (AD 30–130). The first is from the Roman governor of the province of Bythinia-Pontus (in modern-day Turkey), Pliny the Younger.
    1. The reference occurs in a letter written by Pliny to his emperor, Trajan (AD 112), reporting administrative problems with groups who were meeting illegally; in that context he mentions a group of Christians who are followers of "Christ, whom they worship as a God" ("Letter 10 to the Emperor Trajan").
    2. His major concern is how to stamp out this group. His remark about Jesus is made only in passing, but it shows that he had heard of Jesus.
  - D. The second, and more substantial, reference comes in the writings of a friend of Pliny, the famous Roman historian Tacitus.
    1. In his history of Rome, *The Annals* (AD 115), Tacitus discusses an incident that had happened fifty years earlier, when the Emperor Nero torched the city of Rome to enable him to develop his own architectural plans for the city (AD 64).
    2. Tacitus indicates that when Nero became suspected for perpetrating the arson, he sought, and easily found, a ready scapegoat in the band of Christians in the city, who were generally despised by the populace. Nero had the Christians rounded up, charged with the arson, and executed in various heinous ways.
    3. In that context, Tacitus mentions something that they were followers of "Christ" whom, he notes, was crucified under the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was the emperor.
    4. Again, it is useful to know that Tacitus knows this much about Jesus. The reference does not, though, provide us with much information—and none that we didn't already have.

- E. No other certain references to Jesus exist in any pagan author within a century of his death.

### III. The surviving Jewish sources are also of little use in reconstructing the life of Jesus.

- A. Not nearly as many Jewish sources survive from the period.
- B. The main source for the history of Palestine at the time is Flavius Josephus, a Jewish aristocrat who was a general in the northern part of Israel (Galilee) during the Jewish uprising against Rome in AD 66–70.
  - 1. When he and his troops were surrounded by the Roman legions, they made a suicide pact. Lots were drawn to determine who would kill whom, until the final two soldiers would take their own lives. Josephus managed to draw one of the final two lots, then persuaded his remaining companion to surrender.
  - 2. When he was brought before the conquering general Vespasian, Josephus used a good bit of political savvy by predicting that Vespasian himself would become the Roman emperor. As it turns out, he was right. Nero committed suicide and, after a rapid succession of three emperors in the course of a year, Vespasian was declared emperor by his troops.
  - 3. Vespasian rewarded Josephus for his prophecy by giving him an annual stipend and a residence in Rome. Josephus wrote a number of significant literary works that provide us with our best information about the life and history of Palestine: a lengthy account of the Jewish Wars, and a twenty-volume work on the history of the Jews from Adam and Eve to his own time, called the *Jewish Antiquities*.
- C. Jesus is never mentioned in the *Jewish Wars*, but he makes two tantalizingly brief appearances in the *Antiquities*.
  - 1. The briefer of the two references indicates that he was called by some the messiah and that he had a brother named James.
  - 2. The longer reference gives more detail, indicating that Jesus was known to be a wise man, who did spectacular deeds and had a following among both Jews and Gentiles. He was brought up on charges by the Jewish leaders, appeared before Pontius Pilate, and was crucified. His followers formed a community that continued to thrive, first in Judea, then elsewhere, even in Rome.
  - 1. Some scholars debate the authenticity of some of what Josephus wrote about Jesus.
  - 2. It is useful to know that the premier historian of first-century Judaism knew this much about Jesus, especially given that what Josephus says coincides with what we already knew from the Gospels. Unfortunately, Josephus gives us nothing more, and his work can scarcely be used to help reconstruct the life of Jesus.

- D. No other references to Jesus exist in any other Jewish source written within a century of his death. However, Jesus is mentioned in the Talmud, AD fifth-century commentaries on AD second-century collections of oral traditions called the *Mishnah*.

IV. The other books of the New Testament, outside of the four Gospels, tell us very little about Jesus.

- A. The most prolific of the other authors is Paul, in whose name appear thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. But Paul gives us little information about Jesus. The following list is meant to be exhaustive:

1. He was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4).
2. He was Jew (Gal. 4:4).
3. He had brothers, one of whom was named James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19).
4. He had twelve disciples (1 Cor. 15:5).
5. He ministered to Jews (Rom. 15:8).
6. He taught his followers that they should not get divorced and that they should pay their ministers (1 Cor. 7:11; 9:14).
7. He had a last supper with his disciples (1 Cor. 11:23–26).
8. He was betrayed (1 Cor. 11:23).
9. He was crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

- B. One other source from the New Testament must be mentioned. Technically speaking, this source is not a Gospel, but it probably provided the Gospels with some of their material. This is the much discussed, but hypothetical, document called “Q.”

1. The term “Q” stands for the German word *Quelle*, “source.” German scholars developed the idea that there was once a Gospel that was used by Matthew and Luke and simply called this source, “source.”
2. Three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, have so many stories in common that scholars call them the “Synoptic” Gospels (from the Greek for “seen together”: the stories can be set side by side and compared easily); they most likely all depended on some of the same sources for their information.
3. The consensus since the nineteenth century is that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke got a number of their stories (which they usually changed) from Mark.
4. How does one explain *other* stories found in Matthew and Luke, sometimes word-for-word the same, that are not found in Mark? (Mark has scarcely anything not also found in the other two.)
5. According to the widely held view, Matthew and Luke acquired these stories from another source that they had at their disposal but that we do not have at ours: Q.

6. Almost all of these other non-Markan traditions that are found in both Matthew and Luke are sayings of Jesus—including some of his best known sayings, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes. Only two narratives are told in this material: the stories of the three temptations in the wilderness and Jesus' healing of the Capernaum official's son.
7. Both Matthew and Luke must have also had other sources—written possibly, but certainly oral—for their material, because each Gospel has stories about Jesus found in it alone. Scholars usually simplify the matter by calling Matthew's special source(s) "M" and Luke's "L."
8. We surmise, then, that Q was a written document that contained mostly sayings of Jesus—much like Thomas, which was written at least a half century later. As we saw, Thomas does not contain an account of Jesus' death and resurrection; most scholars think that Q did not either, although it is almost impossible to say. (The only way we know what was in Q is if Matthew and Luke have a story in common that is not also found in Mark. It's possible that in places only Matthew or only Luke or neither of them took over a story from Q—including stories of Jesus' passion.)
9. Most scholars think Q was written at least by the time of Mark but probably somewhat earlier (say, during the 50s or 60s AD). If they are right, in one sense, then, Q would represent our earliest source for the life of Jesus—even though we don't actually have it.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 13.

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 5.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Why do you imagine Jesus is scarcely mentioned in Jewish and pagan sources for the first century after his life? Try to think up a couple of plausible explanations and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Then do the same exercise for the apostle Paul.
2. If Q is a hypothetical source, how much do you think we can rely on it for reconstructing the life of Jesus?

## Lecture Nine

### Historical Criteria—Getting Back to Jesus

**Scope:** Now that we have considered all the available sources for the historical Jesus, we can consider how to use them to reconstruct his actual words and deeds. In an ideal world, our sources for any figure of the past would be numerous; close in time to the events they narrate; and written by eyewitnesses who worked independently of one another, who were not overly biased toward their subject matter, and who basically agreed on their major points. The sources available for the historical Jesus are unusually valuable in some ways; for example, several of them are independent of one another. They also pose some challenges. They were not written by eyewitnesses near the time of the events they describe, but by authors who lived later, in different parts of the world; who were biased toward their subject; who are not completely consistent with one another; and who inherited their stories from an oral tradition in which they had undergone serious alteration.

With a clear view of our sources, we can develop criteria to help us approach the sources to recover the words and deeds of Jesus. In general terms, we are best served to give particular weight to the earliest sources and to sources that appear to provide a portrayal of Jesus that is not overly developed theologically; moreover, the particular biases and emphases of all our sources must be considered.

Scholars have devised three criteria for establishing historically reliable material. The first is the criterion of independent attestation, which states that any tradition about Jesus that is independently attested in multiple sources is more likely to be historically authentic than a tradition found, ultimately, in only one source.

### Outline

- I. To this point in the course, we have spent most our effort in examining the four available basic sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus: the canonical Gospels; other writings of the New Testament; Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament; and pagan and Jewish sources from within the first century of Jesus' death.
  - A. I should stress that the sources we've examined are the *only* sources available. If someone says something about Jesus that's not based in any of these sources, he or she is making it up.
  - B. We need to move beyond a discussion of the surviving sources to the question of methodology. Given the nature of our sources, how can we use them to determine what actually happened during the life of Jesus?



- II. We should begin in the broadest terms by asking what a historian of antiquity might hope for in a set of sources, then reflect on how what we have available stacks up against this historian's wish list.
- A. Historians can, of course, imagine an ideal set of sources for reconstructing a past event.
1. The sources would be numerous (the more the better), so that they can be compared to one another.
  2. They would derive from a time near the event itself, which would mean they were less likely to be based on hearsay or legend.
  3. They would have been produced independently of one another, so that their authors were not in collusion.
  4. They would not contradict one another, so that one or more of them is not necessarily in error.
  5. They would be internally consistent, so that they show a basic concern for reliability.
  6. They would not be biased toward the subject matter, so that they have not skewed their accounts to serve their own purposes.
- B. To some extent, we are quite fortunate to have the kinds of sources we do for the historical Jesus.
1. Jesus' life is presented in multiple ancient sources (e.g., Mark, Q, M, L, Paul, Thomas, Josephus, and so on).
  2. Many of these accounts of his words and deeds are independent of one another—that is, the author of Mark didn't know Q; John probably hadn't read the Synoptics; Paul, who was writing before any of the Gospels had been written, obviously didn't know what they were going to say; the Gospel writers show no evidence of having been influenced by Paul; and so on.
- C. On the other hand, these sources have obvious historical problems when compared with our historians' wish list.
1. The sources are not disinterested accounts written by impartial observers near the time of the events they narrate.
  2. None of these authors was an eyewitness. They spoke a different language from the eyewitnesses, lived in different countries from the eyewitnesses, and addressed different audiences with different needs and concerns. Their own beliefs would have affected their accounts.
  3. Each of these authors, as two of them (Luke and John) actually tell us, inherited his stories from earlier written sources. Each of these sources has its own perspective, as well.
  4. Before anyone bothered to write stories about Jesus, the stories had circulated by word of mouth for years and were changed to suit the purposes at hand. They were modified further when they were written down in such lost documents as Q and further still when rewritten by the authors of the Gospels.

5. This view is not based simply on scholarly imagination. We have evidence for it from the Gospels, as noted in earlier lectures.
- D. How then can “faith documents” such as the Gospels— writings produced by believers for believers to promote belief—be used as historical sources?

III. We should first consider a few basic methodological principles that most historians would agree should be applied to our sources.

- A. Historical sources closest to an event have a greater likelihood of being accurate than those at a further remove.
  1. This isn’t a hard and fast rule, of course; sometimes, later sources can recount events more accurately than earlier ones.
  2. The rule of thumb, particularly with the ancient world (where authors didn’t have our data retrieval systems), is that “earlier is better.”
  3. The logic of the principle, especially when dealing with ancient sources, is that as an event is discussed and reports about it circulate, the opportunities for it to be changed become greater and greater—until just about everyone gets the story wrong.
  4. In terms of our study, this means that the earliest sources should be especially valued. John, written about sixty or seventy years after the events it narrates is less likely to be accurate than Mark, written some thirty years earlier. Recall what John did with the date and time of Jesus’ death.
  5. So, too, the Gospels of Peter and Thomas may be less accurate; although they rely on earlier materials, they were evidently produced in the early second century.
  6. Following this principle, our best source of all would be Paul (who regrettably doesn’t tell us very much), then Q (that is, the common source shared by Matthew and Luke for stories not found in Mark) and Mark, followed by M (Matthew’s special source[s]) and L (Luke’s), and so on.
- B. We should be alert to later developments (e.g., theological views) in the tradition that have affected our.
  1. For example, the Gospel of John, the last of the canonical Gospels, has a far more exalted view of Jesus as God than can be found in the earlier sources.
  3. Our question as historians is *not* whether the things Jesus says of himself in John are true, but whether they are things that the historical Jesus actually said.
  3. The logic behind the need to be alert to later theological developments is pretty straightforward: A greater passage of time allows greater sustained theological reflection.
- C. We should beware of the bias found in each author.

1. We've seen already in some of the sources how just about every story drives home, either subtly or obviously, the same point (e.g., the vendetta against the Jewish people in the Gospel of Peter).
2. Whenever we can determine an author's biases, we can and must take them into account when considering his or her report.
3. An example is the report in the Gospel of Peter that it was the Jewish King Herod and his court that had Jesus crucified. In all other early sources, the Roman governor Pilate is said to be responsible. Peter's established bias against the Jews should give one pause when evaluating his version of the event.
4. Consider, too, the change in the time of Jesus' death in John, in which Jesus dies on the same day at the same hour as the Passover lambs in the Temple. For John, Jesus *is* the Passover lamb; we must be wary of his dating in view of his theological agenda.

IV. We can apply three specific criteria, developed over the past half-century by scholars, to the traditions about Jesus to learn what historically reliable information they contain.

- A. Other scholars number these criteria differently or propose alternative ones, but almost always, the alternatives can be logically subsumed under one of these three, which can be applied to any tradition about Jesus found in any source.
- B. My own reconstruction of what Jesus actually said and did will be rooted in these criteria.
- C. If you do not like these criteria, you will need to come up with others of your own. Given the wide-ranging problems posed by our sources, we can't simply take them uncritically as being historically accurate.
- D. In this lecture, we will consider one of the criteria; in the next lecture, the other two. For each, I will try to explain the requisite logic and illustrate the use of the criterion by citing a number of examples.

V. One of the most widely used criteria is called the "criterion of independent attestation."

- A. One helpful way to think about the criterion of independent attestation is to compare the work of the historian to that of a prosecuting attorney, who tries to establish what actually happened in the past.
  1. It is better to have a number of witnesses who can provide consistent testimony than to have only one, especially if the witnesses can be shown not to have conferred with one another to get their stories straight.
  2. So, too, with history. An event mentioned in several independent documents is more likely to be historically accurate than an event mentioned in only one.
  3. This is not to deny that individual documents can provide reliable historical information. Without corroborating evidence, however, it

is often impossible to know whether an individual author has made up an account or, perhaps, provided a skewed version of it.

4. As we've seen, we do have a number of independent sources for the life of Jesus: Mark, Paul, Q, M, L, and John all wrote independently of one another. Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas, possibly the Gospel of Peter, and certainly Josephus were all produced independently of our other surviving accounts.
  5. If tradition about Jesus is preserved in more than one of these documents, no one of them could have made it up, because the others knew of it as well, independently.
  6. If a tradition is found in several of these sources, then the likelihood of its going back to the very beginning of the tradition from which they all ultimately derive, that is, back to the historical Jesus himself, is significantly improved.
- B. This criterion does not work for sources that are not independent.
1. For example, the story of Jesus and the so-called "Rich Young Ruler" is found in three of the Gospels (Matt. 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; and Luke 18:18–23). Because Matthew and Luke took the story from Mark, however, it is not independently attested.
  2. For this reason, the criterion of independent attestation does not work for stories found among all three Synoptic Gospels, because the source for such stories is Mark, or among any two of them, because these are either from Mark or Q.
- C. Let's examine some examples to help clarify the circumstances in which the criterion can be applied.
1. Stories in which John the Baptist encounters Jesus at the beginning of his ministry can be found in Mark, in Q (where John's preaching is expounded), and in John. Why did all three sources, independently of one another, begin Jesus' ministry with his association with John the Baptist? Possibly because it really did start this way.
  2. Jesus is said to have been crucified by all four of the Gospels (and in Peter), along with Paul, Josephus, and Tacitus; in all these accounts except Paul's the execution is dated to the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Pilate is known to have been governor from AD 26–36, and Jesus must have been crucified by him sometime during that period.
  3. Jesus is said to have brothers in Mark (6:3), John (7:3), and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (9:5); moreover, Mark, Paul (Gal. 1:19), and Josephus all identify one of his brothers as James. Conclusion: Jesus probably did have brothers and one of them was probably named James.
  4. A number of sources attest that Jesus caused a disturbance in the Temple that angered the Jewish leaders and that he predicted the Temple would be destroyed (see Mark 11:15; John 2:15; Mark

13:2; John 2:19; Gospel of Thomas 71). Conclusion: It appears that the cleansing of the Temple and the prediction of its destruction go back to the historical Jesus.

5. Jesus tells parables in which he likens the Kingdom of God to seeds in Mark, Q, and the Gospel of Thomas.

**D.** This criterion has some obvious limitations.

1. First, it is important to emphasize that merely because a tradition is found in only one source, it is not automatically discounted as historically inaccurate. For example, the parables of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Samaritan occur only in Luke—but that in itself does not necessarily mean that Jesus did not tell them.
2. The criterion shows which traditions are more likely to be authentic but does not show which ones are necessarily inauthentic, a critical difference.
3. At the same time, multiply attested traditions are not necessarily authentic either. Instead, they are more likely to be authentic. If a tradition is attested independently by two or more sources, then it must be older than all the sources that record it. This is not the same as saying that it must go all the way back to Jesus.
4. For this reason, our first criterion must be supplemented with others. We will consider two other such criteria in our next lecture.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 6.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

**Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*.

Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Pick two events that occurred last month—one that you think you could demonstrate happened beyond the shadow of a doubt and one that you think you would have real difficulty demonstrating. What is the difference in the nature of the evidence between the two?
2. Under what circumstances would it be possible to argue that an independently attested tradition was *not* historical? If the tradition was not historical, how do you imagine that it came to be independently attested?

## Lecture Ten

### More Historical Criteria

**Scope:** In addition to the criterion of independent attestation, scholars have devised two other criteria to determine the historical reliability of any tradition about Jesus preserved in the surviving sources. The first is the “criterion of dissimilarity,” which maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not coincide with, or that works against, the vested interests of the Christians who preserved it is likely to be historically reliable. The logic is that if Christians altered the traditions about Jesus and on occasion even made them up, then any tradition that would not advance their purposes in doing so must actually go back to Jesus himself. The best way to understand this criterion is to see it applied; some of the most significant events of Jesus’ life do pass it, including his baptism by John and his crucifixion.

The third criterion is called “contextual credibility.” It maintains that any tradition about Jesus that cannot be plausibly situated in his first-century Jewish Palestinian context cannot be accepted as historically reliable. Unlike the other two criteria, which are *positive* (i.e., they are used to argue which traditions *are* reliable), this one is principally *negative* (arguing which traditions are not). Again, the criterion is best understood by considering examples, including some drawn from the later Gospels of John and Thomas, which portray Jesus in ways that make better sense in their own later contexts than in his own.

### Outline

- I. The second and most controversial criterion that historians use, and often misuse, to establish authentic tradition from the life of Jesus is sometimes called the “criterion of dissimilarity.”
  - A. The criterion can be explained by analogy to a legal case.
    1. Any witness in court will naturally tell things the way he or she sees them. The perspective of the witness must be taken into account when trying to evaluate the merits of a case. Sometimes a witness has a vested interest in the outcome of the trial.
    2. If the witness testifies counter to his or her vested interests, that testimony is more likely to be true.
    3. The analogy does not completely fit ancient literary sources.
  - B. This is particularly the case when dealing with sources that describe events from the life of Jesus.
    1. We know that early Christians modified and invented stories about Jesus (cf., the stories in the Gospels of Thomas and Peter).

2. We must determine what the early Christians were trying to say about Jesus and to ascertain whether the traditions told about in his sayings and deeds clearly support these Christian views.
  3. What if a saying or deed attributed to Jesus does *not* obviously support a Christian cause, or even works against it? A Christian would not generally make up a tradition of this kind. Why would it be preserved? Perhaps because it really did happen that way.
  4. The criterion of dissimilarity, then, maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not support a clear Christian agenda, or that appears to work against the vested interests of the Christians telling the story, is more likely to be historical.
- C. This criterion has limitations.
1. Just because a saying or deed of Jesus happens to conform to what Christians were saying about him does not mean that it cannot be accurate.
  2. Thus, the criterion may do no more than cast a shadow of doubt on certain traditions (cf., the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and some of the sayings of Jesus in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas).
  3. But the criterion of dissimilarity is best used not in the negative way of establishing what Jesus did not say or do, but in the positive way of showing what he likely did.
- D. The best way to clarify how the criterion works is by showing it in action using several examples:
1. Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist—it was widely assumed in early Christianity that a person who was baptized was spiritually inferior to the one who was doing the baptizing (cf., the dialogue between Jesus and John found only in Matt 3:15–16).
  2. Jesus' crucifixion—the idea that the Messiah would be crucified was scandalous for most Jews, who thought that the Messiah would be a figure of grandeur and power who would overthrow the forces of evil to bring in God's kingdom (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:23).
  2. Jesus' betrayal by Judas, one of his own followers, (multiply attested)—this might make it appear that Jesus was lacking in authority or power, even over those closest to him.
  4. Sometimes the criterion can be applied to specific sayings. For example, in Mark 8:38, it is not at all clear that the cosmic judge (the "Son of Man") who is coming from heaven to wreak havoc on the earth is Jesus himself—even though Christians were completely and unambiguously convinced that it was.
  5. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is similar. The notion of salvation on the basis of doing good things is contrary to the early Christian belief that salvation came from believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- E. Other sayings and deeds of Jesus obviously do not pass this criterion.

1. For example, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus three times predicts that he must go to Jerusalem to be rejected and executed. This is precisely what the early Christian preachers were saying about Jesus' fate, that he didn't die because of an accidental miscarriage of justice but because of the plan of God.
  2. In John's Gospel, Jesus claims to be equal with God, a claim that coincides with what some Christians were saying about him near the end of the first century, when John's Gospel was written.
  3. Such traditions may strike us as suspect in view of the criterion; they cannot be established as certainly going back to Jesus when viewed in its light.
- F. Historians must evaluate all the traditions about Jesus to determine whether they coincide with the beliefs and practices of the early Christians to make a judgment about their historical reliability.
1. One problem in the criterion, as you might guess, is that we do not know as much about the early Christians as we would like, and what we do know indicates a variety of beliefs and practices.
  2. It is easier to make a judgment concerning a particular tradition when it passes both of the criteria we have discussed (independent attestation and dissimilarity).

II. A final methodological principle, called the "criterion of contextual credibility," is rooted in the necessity of understanding Jesus' context for determining which traditions can be reliably attributed to him.

- A. The logic of the principle can again be explained in terms of a judicial proceeding.
1. In a court of law, the testimony of a witness will not hold up under cross-examination if it does not coincide with the facts of the case.
  2. The same applies to historical documents. If a newly "discovered" text has "250 BC" written on it, we know there is a problem.
  3. For ancient documents, reliable traditions must conform to the historical and social contexts to which they relate. For the traditions of the Gospels, this means that the sayings, deeds, and experiences of Jesus must be plausibly situated in the historical context of first-century Palestine to be trusted as reliable.
- B. Because this principle seems fairly obvious, I will illustrate it simply with a couple of examples.
1. Some sayings in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas are much easier to situate in the context of the second century, when the Gnostic myth that makes sense of the sayings was influential, than in the days of Jesus (e.g., saying 37).
  2. The tradition found in the Gospel of Peter that it was the Jewish King Herod who had Jesus executed rather than the Roman governor Pilate does not conform with what we know about the administration of Judea in the days of Jesus.



3. The conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus in John 3, in which he says, “you must be born again,” depends on a play on words in Greek. The Greek word for “again” also means “above”; Nicodemus thinks Jesus means the first, but he really means the second. This word play cannot be replicated in Aramaic, the language that Jesus would have been speaking. The conversation could not then have occurred in this way.

- C. Unlike the other two criteria, the criterion of contextual credibility serves a strictly negative function. The others are used to argue *for* a tradition, while the third is used to argue *against* a tradition.

### III. Given the nature of our sources, we need to apply a set of rigorous criteria to determine what actually happened in Jesus’ life.

- A. Traditions that we can most rely on as historically accurate are those that are independently attested in a number of sources, that do not appear to have been created to fulfill a need in the early Christian community, and that make sense in a first-century Palestinian context.
- B. With respect to Jesus, or indeed, with respect to any historical person, the historian can do no more than establish probabilities. In no case can we reconstruct the past with absolute certainty. All we can do is take the evidence that happens to survive and determine to the best of our abilities what probably happened.

### Essential Reading:

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 6.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

### Suggested Reading:

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus*.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chaps. 6–7.

### Questions to Consider:

1. At first sight, many people think that the criterion of dissimilarity sounds backwards: Shouldn’t traditions that *conform* with Christian views be the ones that are most likely to be authentic? Explain why this point of view is logically problematic (i.e., explain the logic that makes the criterion of dissimilarity necessary).
2. How might criteria such as the three we’ve discussed be applied to any other historical figure that you know about (e.g., an American president, a famous saint, an ancient military leader)?

## Lecture Eleven

### The Early Life of Jesus

**Scope:** This lecture will illustrate the various criteria for establishing historically reliable tradition by examining what our sources have to say about Jesus' birth and early life. After a brief review of the sources for this period of Jesus' life—Matthew and Luke among the Gospels, with scattered references elsewhere—we will discuss which of the surviving traditions can be trusted as authentic and which cannot.

A rigorous application of our criteria shows that we cannot really know if numerous favorite traditions are historically grounded. We can know, however, that other important information in the Gospels is.

### Outline

- I. The past two lectures have covered criteria that historians can apply to the surviving sources to discover what Jesus said, did, and experienced.
  - A. We've seen that the oldest sources, as a rule, are to be preferred, as are sources that are not as theologically advanced and obviously biased in their presentation.
  - B. We've also seen that the most reliable traditions will pass all three of our criteria: independent attestation, dissimilarity, and contextual credibility.
  - C. In this lecture, I'd like to apply these criteria to the surviving accounts of Jesus' birth and early life both to illustrate how the criteria work in practice and to set the stage for the rest of the course and its consideration of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus.
- II. To begin, we will review the sources that describe this period of Jesus' life.
  - A. Neither our earliest surviving Gospel, Mark, nor the last of the canonical Gospels, John, provides a birth or infancy narrative. Both Gospels do make allusions to matters relevant to this period of Jesus' life. Both, for example, indicate that Jesus came from Nazareth (Mark 1:9; John 1:45) and that he had brothers (John 7:3; Mark 3:32), but only Matthew and Luke have stories about Jesus' birth and early life.
  - B. The accounts in Matthew and Luke are at odds with one another on a number of points.
    - I. We have seen some of these differences in a previous lecture. Were Joseph and Mary originally from Nazareth, as in Luke, or from Bethlehem, as in Matthew? Did they return to Nazareth just a month after Jesus was born, as in Luke, or flee to Egypt, as in Matthew?

2. these differences show beyond much doubt that Matthew and Luke were not dependent on one another for their stories and so constitute independent sources of information.

- C. Some of the information found in Matthew and Luke can be corroborated by non-Gospel accounts that are independent of them. For example, the apostle Paul indicates that Jesus had brothers (1 Cor. 9:5), one of whom was named James (Gal. 1:19).
- D. The non-canonical infancy Gospels also cover this territory, but are not to be relied on as preserving historically accurate information.
  1. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as we have seen, is highly legendary and draws on Luke. It is not an independent witness.
  2. Other infancy Gospels provide us with all sorts of legendary accounts.
- E. Using, for the most part, sources still preserved in the New Testament canon and applying to them the criteria we have discussed, what can we say about the birth and early life of Jesus?

### III. Some of the best known traditions of Jesus' birth cannot be accepted as historically reliable when gauged by our criteria.

- A. We have no way of knowing if Jesus' mother was really a virgin.
  1. The tradition is independently attested in both Matthew and Luke.
  2. Oddly, the tradition isn't attested anywhere else in the earliest sources, even among writers who would have had a real interest in publicizing the fact that God was actually Jesus' father. Both Mark and Paul (writing earlier than Matthew and Luke), for example, consider Jesus to be God's son and refer to his mother (Mark 3:31; Gal 4:4) but say nothing about her being a virgin (in Mark, in fact, she doesn't seem to understand who Jesus really is; 3:21; 31-34). The Gospel of John mentions Joseph and calls him Jesus' father (John 1:45), seeming to assume that Jesus was born in a normal way.
  3. The two sources that mention the virgin birth both have a vested interest in the doctrine. For Matthew, the virgin birth fulfills prophecy (Matt. 1:23) and for Luke, it shows that Jesus really was God's son (Luke 1:35). That is to say, the story does not at all pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  4. For all these reasons, historians have long doubted whether Jesus was actually born of a virgin. In the end, we have no way to know.
- B. It is impossible to know if Jesus was really born in Bethlehem.
  1. All four of the Gospels assume that Jesus came from Nazareth. But two of them—Matthew and Luke again—independently claim that he was born in Bethlehem.
  2. These two are inconsistent with one another at key points (if Matthew's account is right, it's hard to see how Luke's can be also

- and vice versa). Both also present serious historical problems when taken on their own terms (for example, the worldwide census under Caesar Augustus in Luke).
3. Both Matthew and Luke also had a clear reason for wanting to affirm that Jesus came from Bethlehem, because a Hebrew prophet had predicted that a ruler would come from there (Micah 5:2; quoted in Matt. 2:6).
  4. Again, it seems odd that if it were widely known that Jesus came from Bethlehem, the tradition was not mentioned in our other sources (e.g., Mark, John, and Paul).
  5. As a result, most critical historians consider the tradition of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to be highly problematic.
- C. Closely related, of course, is the story that Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to register for a census.
1. This story is found only in Luke and as we saw earlier, the story seems to be contradicted by Matthew.
  2. It's not at all contextually credible. As discussed earlier, we know a good deal about the reign of Caesar Augustus but hear from no other source about some kind of empire-wide tax that compelled everyone needed to register return to their ancestral homes.
- D. The story of the wise men, found only in Matthew, is historically problematic.
1. It is historically implausible, both because no one else living at the time mentioned any such astral phenomenon, which must have attracted considerable attention had it occurred and because it's nearly impossible to understand logistically (how exactly does a star stop over a house?).
  2. Moreover, the story is used to show that heaven itself proclaimed this child's birth to all who had eyes to see, (in fulfillment, probably, of Num. 24:17). In other words, it does not pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  3. The story also shows that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus (they didn't join the wise men in worshipping the child who would be king, even though they knew where he was to be born) and that they—with Herod as their ultimate leader—actually sought the boy's life. These themes anticipate the end of Matthew's Gospel story, in which Jewish animosity leads to Jesus' execution. In other words, these are all theologically-driven traditions.
- E. Similar points could be made of the even more problematic accounts we've already discussed of Luke that are not multiply attested; e.g., from Luke, Jesus' birth when Quirinius was governor of Syria (which doesn't pass contextual credibility) or the adoration in the Temple by Simeon and Anna (which doesn't pass dissimilarity) and the rest.
- F. It is nearly impossible to say whether the one New Testament story about Jesus as a boy (in Luke) is something that actually happened,

since it is not independently attested nor does it pass dissimilarity, because it serves a clear theological agenda of portraying Jesus as a *wunderkind* (Luke 2:41–52) who was completely dedicated to God and superior to the leaders of the Jews at the age of twelve.

IV. We do have traditions that clearly pass our criteria, and these need to stand at the foundation of what we think about Jesus' birth and early life. I take these to be rock-solid traditions.

- A. Jesus was born and raised a Jew. This is stated explicitly by Paul (Gal. 4:4) and is overwhelmingly attested in all our Gospel sources at every level, i.e., it passes independent attestation in every imaginable way. Virtually nothing is more certain
- B. Jesus came from the small village of Nazareth in Galilee.
  - 1. This tradition passes the criterion of independent attestation quite easily. It is attested in all four Gospels (Matt. 4:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 4:16; John 1:45), and Jesus is sometimes called "Jesus of Nazareth" in other ancient sources (for example, Acts 3:6).
  - 2. Moreover, as we've just seen, Matthew and Luke had to go out of their way to explain how it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, because everyone knew he came from Nazareth. To this extent, the tradition passes the criterion of dissimilarity (that is, neither Matthew nor Luke was comfortable with it).
  - 3. Even more significantly, with respect to dissimilarity, it is difficult to imagine why Christians would have wanted to make up the tradition. Nazareth was, at that time, a small, unknown, and completely insignificant village in Galilee (northern part of modern-day Israel). Nothing would be gained for Jesus' followers to make up a tradition that he came not from Bethlehem (the home of David) or from Jerusalem (the center of power), but from a little one-horse town out in the sticks (cf., John 1:45).
- C. We can say a few things for certain about Jesus' parents.
  - 1. They are assumed to have been Jews who lived in Nazareth and are consistently named Joseph and Mary in our sources (for example, independently, Matt. 1:16–18; Mark 6:3; Luke 2:5, 16; 3:23; John 1:45; even later rabbinic sources call his mother "Miriam").
  - 2. None of our traditions have stories about Joseph after Jesus begins his public ministry. It is usually assumed that he had died by then.
  - 3. The idea that Joseph was already an old man when he became betrothed to Mary, however, is not found until the second century, when it is sometimes used to explain why they never had sex. This idea has absolutely no basis in the earliest Gospel accounts.
  - 4. About the only thing said about Joseph in the Gospels, outside the birth narratives, is that he was a common laborer (Matt. 13:55; also found, possibly independently of Matthew, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, 13).

5. The Greek word used to describe his profession is *tekton*, usually translated as “carpenter.” The word could also refer to a number of occupations that involved working with the hands—stone mason or metal worker, for example. In any event, a *tekton* was a lower class, blue-collar worker, comparable, in modern terms, to a construction worker. It is hard to imagine why Christians would have wanted to make up this tradition (hence, dissimilarity).
  6. Mary is reported in several of our earliest sources to have outlived her son (e.g., in John’s Gospel she watches his crucifixion).
  7. We don’t have any reliable information concerning what Mary actually thought of Jesus, because the traditions that she knew that he was the Son of God even before he was born are not multiply attested (they occur only in Luke) and obviously don’t pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
- D. Jesus evidently had siblings of both sexes.
1. His brothers are mentioned in Mark, John, Josephus, and Paul. His sisters show up in Mark (3:32, 6:3).
  2. It has sometimes been maintained that these were not his actual brothers and sisters. The famous translator of the Latin Vulgate, Jerome, for example, claimed that they were his cousins—even though there is a Greek word for “cousin” that is not used of these people in our sources. Others have claimed that they were his half-siblings from Joseph’s previous marriage.
  3. These claims relate to the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary was a virgin both when Jesus was born and for the rest of her life, after which she ascended to heaven, because she was not tainted by sin.
  4. The Gospels do not mention this, however, so the natural assumption is that Joseph and Mary engaged in sexual relations and had a large family. Jesus was presumably the oldest child.
- E. We have only scattered hints about Jesus’ education.
1. It is clear that he spoke Aramaic (a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew). The tradition is multiply attested (see Mark 5:41; 7:34; John 1:42). The tradition also makes sense contextually, because Aramaic was the normal spoken language of Jews in Palestine in the first century. Moreover, there would be no reason for anyone to make up the tradition. Thus, it passes all three of our criteria.
  2. The Gospels also indicate that Jesus could read the Scriptures in Hebrew (for example, Luke 4:16–20; see also Mark 12:10, 26) and that he eventually became known as an interpreter of them. He is, sometimes, for example, called “rabbi,” that is, “teacher” (see Mark 9:5; John 3:2).
  3. At the same time, we have independently attested traditions that those who knew about Jesus’ background were surprised by his learning (Mark 6:2; John 7:15). This idea is not only multiply

attested, but it also appears to pass the criterion of dissimilarity, because none of the Christians telling stories about Jesus would want anyone to think that he was a slow learner as a child.

4. These data suggest that he did learn to read as a child but that he was not considered an intellectual superstar.
  5. No traditions specifically indicate that Jesus spoke Greek, although some historians have surmised that living in Galilee, where Greek was widely known, he may have learned some. Some have also suspected that he communicated with Pontius Pilate in Greek at his trial, although we will see later that it is very difficult to know exactly what happened then.
  6. At best we can say that it is possible that Jesus was trilingual; that is, that he normally spoke Aramaic, could at least read the Hebrew Scriptures, and may have been able to communicate in Greek.
- F. We are almost completely in the dark about Jesus' early life otherwise. We might assume that he had a normal childhood, but unfortunately we aren't even sure what a "normal" childhood would have been like in rural Galilee. He probably would have been apprenticed to his father's line of work, as a carpenter making yokes and gates or something along a similar line. He is called a *tekton* in Mark 6:3, and it's hard to imagine a Christian's desire to make that up.

### **Essential Reading:**

Matthew 1–2.

Luke 1–2.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, chaps. 8–10.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 7.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Choose one of the traditions of Jesus' birth or early life that appears to pass one criterion but not another. Using reason, argue how you might decide whether the tradition is historically reliable or not.
2. Why do you suppose the Gospels provide so little information about the period of Jesus' life before his baptism by John? Why do we hear almost nothing of his life as a teenager or a young man?

## Lecture Twelve

### Jesus in His Context

**Scope:** It is important to situate the words and Jesus in their own historical context. Not to do so is to take them out of context, which necessarily means to misunderstand them. The history of Palestine for the eight centuries leading up to Jesus was a story of war and foreign domination. Israel was controlled first by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Egyptians, then the Syrians, and then the Romans. Only for about a century in this entire period did Israel have a sovereign state in the land, under the Jewish ruling family known as the Maccabees, who came into power in the mid-second century BC but were overthrown by the Romans in 63 BC. Jesus was born under Roman rule.

More than a century before his birth, different forms of Judaism had emerged in Palestine. The variety of Jewish belief and practice can be seen in some of the prominent sects of the time: the Pharisees, who stressed scrupulous observance of God's law in all its detail; the Sadducees, who focused on worshipping God in the temple through practices of sacrifice; the Essenes, who strove to maintain their own ritual purity in separatist communities set up in anticipation of the coming judgment of God; and the so-called "fourth philosophy," which comprised a variety of groups that stressed their God-given right and need to drive out foreign oppressors and reclaim the land, by force if necessary.

These sects do not include all the religious options open to Jews in Jesus' day; the vast majority of Jews belonged to none of them. They do, however, reveal some of the varieties in Judaism. Jesus was aligned with none of these groups and had deeply rooted differences with each of them.

### Outline

- I. It is absolutely critical that we situate Jesus in his own historical context.
  - A. The criterion of contextual credibility insists that for a tradition about Jesus to be plausible, it must make sense in the world of first-century Palestine Judaism.
  - B. If we try to look at the words and deeds of Jesus outside of that context, we will misunderstand them. This is true of every word and action that every one of us ever experiences.
- II. The history of Palestine was long and complex; here we need deal only with the fraction of it that bore directly on the context of Jesus' adult life.



- A. In a nutshell, the political history of the land had involved some 800 years of periodic wars and virtually permanent foreign domination.
1. The northern part of the land, the Kingdom of "Israel," was overthrown by the Assyrians in 721 BC.
  2. Then, about a century and a half later, in 587–86 BC, the southern Kingdom of "Judah" was conquered by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple was destroyed, and the leaders of the people were taken into exile.
  3. Some fifty years later, the Babylonian Empire was overrun by the Persians under Cyrus, who brought an end to the forced exile and allowed the Judean leaders to return home.
  4. The Temple was rebuilt, and the priest in charge of the Temple, the "high priest," was given jurisdiction as a local ruler of the people. This was a man from an ancient family that traced its line back hundreds of years to a priest named "Zadok."
  5. Ultimately, of course, the Persian king was the final authority over the land and its people.
- B. This state of affairs continued for nearly two centuries, until the conquests of Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia., who overthrew the Persian Empire, conquering most of the lands around the eastern Mediterranean as far as modern-day India in 336–323 BC.
1. Alexander brought Greek culture into the various regions he conquered, building Greek cities and schools and *gymnasias* (centers of culture), encouraging the acceptance of Greek culture and religion, and promoting the use of the Greek language.
  2. When Alexander died, still a young man (in 323 BC), his generals divided up his realm, and Palestine fell under the rule of Ptolemy, the general in charge of Egypt.
  3. During time, the Jewish high priest remained the local ruler of the land of Judea; that did not change when the ruler of Syria took control of Palestine from the Ptolemaeans in 198 BC.
- C. The Syrian monarchs, especially under Antiochus IV, otherwise known as Antiochus Epiphanes exacerbated tensions with foreign domination when he decided to bring greater cultural unity to his empire by requiring his subjects to adopt aspects of Greek civilization.
1. Some of the Jews living in Palestine welcomed these innovations, while others, however, found this process of "Hellenization," (i.e., the imposition of Greek, or Hellenistic, culture) absolutely offensive to their religion.
  3. In response to their protests, made it illegal for Jews to circumcise their baby boys and to maintain their Jewish identity, converting the Jewish Temple into a pagan sanctuary, and requiring Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods.
- D. A revolt broke out, started by a family of Jewish priests known to history both as the "Maccabees," based on the name given to one of its

powerful leaders, Judas “Maccabeus” (that is, Judas “the Hammerer”), and also as the “Hasmoneans,” based on the name of a distant ancestor.

1. The Maccabean revolt began in 167 BC as a small guerrilla skirmish and ended with much of the country in armed rebellion against its Syrian overlords.
  2. In less than twenty-five years, the Maccabeans had successfully driven the Syrian army out of the land and assumed full and total control of its governance, creating the first sovereign Jewish state for over four centuries.
  3. They rededicated the Temple—one of their first acts, in 164 BC (commemorated still by Hanukkah)—and appointed a high priest as supreme ruler of the land.
  4. To the dismay of many Jews in Palestine, however, the high priest was not from the traditional and ancient line of Zadok but from the common stock of priests of the Hasmonean family.
  5. The Hasmoneans ruled the land as an autonomous state for eighty years, until 63 BC, when the Roman general Pompey came in conquest.
- E. The Romans allowed the high priest to remain in office, using him as an administrative liaison with the local Jewish leadership. But there was no doubt who controlled the land. Eventually, in 40 BC, Rome appointed a king to rule the Jews of Palestine: Herod the Great.
1. Herod was widely known both for his ruthless exercise of power and for his magnificent building projects.
  2. Many Jews, however, castigated Herod as an opportunistic collaborator with the Romans, a traitorous half-Jew at best. This charge was based on his lineage. His parents were from the neighboring country of Idumea and had been forced to convert to Judaism before his birth.
  3. During the days of Jesus, after Herod’s death, Galilee, the northern region of the land, was ruled by Herod’s son, Antipas, and starting when Jesus was a boy, Judea, the southern region, was governed by Roman administrators known as prefects. Pontius Pilate was prefect during the whole of Jesus’ ministry and for some years after his death. His headquarters were in Caesarea, but he came to Jerusalem, with troops, whenever the need arose.
- F. The historical events leading up to Jesus’ time are significant for understanding his life because of their social and intellectual consequences, which affected the lives of all Palestinian Jews.
1. The Jewish “sects” of Jesus’ day (for example, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) were formed in response to the social, political, and religious crises of the Maccabean period.
  2. The Roman occupation led to numerous nonviolent and violent uprisings during Jesus’ time, uprisings of Jews for whom any

foreign domination of the “Promised Land” was both politically and religiously unacceptable.

III. Various Jewish sects emerged during the rule of the Hasmoneans, largely in reaction to that rule. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions four of these groups; the New Testament refers explicitly to three. All of these groups play a significant role in our understanding of the life of the historical Jesus.

- A. Most Jews did not belong to any of them. Josephus indicates that the largest sect, the Pharisees, claimed 6,000 members and the Essenes claimed 4,000. The Sadducees probably had far fewer. The overall Jewish population in the world at the time was probably between three and four million.
  - 1. Still, these small groups were powerful in their own ways—especially in the social and political scene in Palestine.
  - 2. All members of these groups subscribed to the basic theological views characteristic of Jews just about everywhere. They all believed, for example, in the one true God, the creator of all things, who was revealed in the Scriptures, who had chosen his people Israel, and had promised to protect and defend them in exchange for their devotion to him through following his laws.
- B. The groups differed in significant ways, however, on the issues of what practices were required in obeying God’s laws and how to react both to the rule of a foreign power and to the presence of a high priest from a line other than Zadok’s.

IV. The best known group was the Pharisees, who, contrary to the modern misperception, were not professional hypocrites.

- A. They were a highly committed group of Jews who believed in following God’s law, as revealed in the Torah (Hebrew word for “law”—a reference to the Law of Moses found in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), absolutely as far as possible.
- B. At places, though, the Law of Moses was ambiguous.
  - 1. It was clear, for example, that Jews were supposed to keep the Sabbath day “holy.” This was taken to mean that one should not engage in work on the Sabbath the way one did on other days. But the law never defined what “work” was.
  - 2. The Pharisees came up with rulings to indicate what one could or could not do on the Sabbath to keep the commandment.
  - 3. This kind of ruling was circulated and came to be seen as a set of “oral” laws (as opposed to the written law of Moses), which if kept would assure the faithful Jew of keeping God’s “written” law.
  - 4. These oral laws were eventually written down by later rabbis, or Jewish teachers, about 200 years after Jesus, in the book called the *Mishnah*, the heart of the very large collection of Jewish lore and learning called the Talmud.

- C. It is a mistake to see Pharisees as hypocrites. Quite the opposite, most of them appear to have been sincere and highly devout. Their emphasis was on keeping the Law of God in all its detail. Jesus, however, had a different opinion about what really mattered to God.
- V. We are less well informed about the Sadducees, because none of them left us any writings.
- A. It appears that the Sadducees were from the upper-class aristocracy of the Jews. Many of them were priests in the Jewish Temple.
  - B. The Sadducees are known to have disputed with the Pharisees over the statutes of the oral law. For them, what really mattered was what God had written through Moses in the Torah—especially as it related to the worship of God in the Temple.
  - C. Contrary to popular opinion, it was the Sadducees (not the Pharisees) who were the real power players in first-century Israel. The chief priests came from their ranks, and they were the ones who represented the local concerns of the Jews to the Roman governor.
  - D. The overarching concerns of the Sadducees were centered on the sacrificial cult in the Temple. The Sadducees seem to have been open to Roman rule, as long as they were allowed to perform the sacrifices prescribed by God in the Torah. Again, Jesus had a different understanding of what really mattered to God.
- VI. The Essenes were a group of highly religious Jews who believed that the rest of the people of Israel had fallen away from God and become impure.
- A. As it turns out, we probably know more about the Essenes than any of the other groups, even though they are never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. In addition to references in Josephus and several other ancient writers, we now have a collection of writings that appear to have been produced by Essenes: the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.
    - 1. As was the case with the Gnostic documents uncovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was completely serendipitous.
    - 2. In 1947, a shepherd boy searching for a lost goat in the barren wilderness near a place called Qumran, by the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, happened to toss a stone into a cave and heard it strike something. Going in, he discovered an ancient earthenware jar that contained a number of old scrolls.
    - 3. The books were recovered by Bedouin shepherds, news of the discovery reached antiquities dealers, biblical scholars learned of the find, and a search was conducted to find more scrolls in the caves and to retrieve those that had already been found by the Bedouin, who had cut some of them up to sell one piece at a time.

4. Some of the caves in the region yielded entire scrolls; others contained thousands of tiny scraps that are virtually impossible to piece back together.
  5. Most of the scrolls are written in Hebrew; others, in Aramaic; a few, in Greek.
  6. Different kinds of literature are represented here, including at least partial copies of every book of the Jewish Bible, with the exception of the book of Esther; commentaries on some of the biblical books; books of psalms and hymns; prophecies that indicate the future course of events that were believed to be about to transpire in the authors' day; and rules for the members of the community to follow in their lives together.
- B.** Sifting through all these books, scholars have been able to reconstruct the life and beliefs of the Essenes in considerable detail.
1. Believing that the Jews of Jerusalem had gone astray, this group of Essenes chose to start their own community, in which they could keep the Mosaic law rigorously and maintain their own ritual purity in the wilderness.
  2. They did so fully expecting the apocalypse of the end of time to be imminent. When it came, a final battle would take place between the forces of good and evil, the children of light and the children of darkness. The battle would climax with the triumph of God and the entry of his children into the blessed kingdom.
  3. Some of the scrolls indicate that this kingdom would be ruled by two messiahs, one a king and the other a priest. The priestly messiah would lead the faithful in their worship of God in a purified Temple, where sacrifices could again be made in accordance with God's will.
  4. In the meantime, the true people of God needed to be removed from the impurities of this world, including those prevalent in the Jewish Temple and among the rest of the Jewish people.
  5. The Essenes, therefore, started their own monastic-like community with strict rules for admission and membership.
  6. It appears that when the Jewish War of AD 66–73 began, the Essenes at Qumran hid some of their sacred writings before joining in the struggle. They may well have seen this as the final battle, preliminary to the end of time when God would establish his kingdom and send its messiahs.
- C.** In short, the Essenes stressed their own ritual purity as the most important aspect of their relationship with God. Again, Jesus took another view.

VII. The final group of Jews mentioned by Josephus is called, simply, the Fourth Philosophy.

- A. This term comprises a number of groups of Jews who believed that God had given them the land of Israel and that it should be taken back by force from those who currently ruled it.
- B. This group (or rather, groups) believed in violent resistance to any foreign power in the land, especially the Romans. They eventually had their way. In the year AD 66, just a generation after Jesus' death, a revolt against the Romans broke out, leading to a three-and-a-half-year war that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple.
- C. The religious outlook of the Fourth Philosophy centered on the Jewish homeland as the place given by God to his people, which should not be ruled by any foreign power. Again, Jesus had a different point of view.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 7.

Sanders, *Judaism Practice and Belief*.

Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*.

**Suggested Reading:**

Fitzmyer, *101 Questions*.

Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*.

Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Try to imagine, and then to articulate, a variety of views that might be embodied among a people who have long been subject to the rule of a foreign power. Can you imagine, for example, groups of people who would favor that kind of situation? Who? Why? Who would oppose it?
2. What appear to be the common denominators among the various groups of Jews (the "sects") that we've discussed in this lecture?

## Timeline

1800 BC?	Abraham
1400 BC?	Moses
753 BC	Traditional date for founding of Rome
750–500 BC?	Prophets of Hebrew Bible
750 BC?	Homer
587 BC	Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem
510 BC	Beginning of Roman Republic
c. 400 BC	Plato
333–323 BC	Conquests of Alexander the Great
300–198 BC	Palestine under Egyptian rule
198–142 BC	Palestine under Syrian rule
167–142 BC	Maccabean revolt
145 BC	Book of Daniel (final book of Hebrew Bible)
140 BC	Rise of Jewish sects
142–37 BC	Maccabean rule
63 BC	Conquest of Palestine by Romans
44 BC	Assassination of Julius Caesar
40–4 BC	Herod King of the Jews
4 BC–AD 39	Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee
27 BC–AD 14	Octavian Caesar Augustus as emperor
4 BC?	Jesus' birth
AD 14–37	Emperor Tiberius
AD 18–36	Caiaphas, high priest in Jerusalem
AD 26–36	Pilate as Governor of Judea
AD 30?	Jesus' death
AD 33?	Conversion of Paul
AD 37–100	Josephus (Jewish historian)
AD 37–41	Emperor Caligula

AD 41–54.....	Emperor Claudius
AD 54–68.....	Emperor Nero
AD 50–60?.....	Pauline epistles
AD 50–60?.....	“Q” Source
AD 56–117?.....	Tacitus
AD 50–70?.....	“M” and “L” Sources
AD 61–113.....	Pliny the Younger
AD 65?.....	Gospel of Mark
AD 69–79.....	Emperor Vespasian
AD 66–70.....	Jewish Revolt and destruction of Temple
AD 79–81.....	Emperor Titus
AD 80–85?.....	Gospels of Matthew and Luke
AD 81–96.....	Emperor Domitian
AD 90–95?.....	Gospel of John
AD 56–120.....	Tacitus
AD 62–113.....	Pliny the Younger
AD 98–117.....	Emperor Trajan
AD 110–130?.....	Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Infancy Thomas



## Glossary

**Alexander the Great:** The great military leader of Macedonia (356–323 BC) whose armies conquered much of the lands around the Mediterranean, including Egypt, Palestine, and Persia, and who was responsible for the spread of Greek culture (Hellenism) throughout the lands he conquered.

**Antiochus IV** (= Antiochus Epiphanes): Syrian monarch who compelled the Jews of Palestine to adopt Greek culture, leading to the Maccabean revolt in 167 BCE.

**Antitheses:** Literally, “contrary statements”; used to designate six sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21–48), in which he states a Jewish Law (“You have heard it said...”), then sets his own interpretation against it (“But I say to you...”).

**Apocalypticism:** A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil that God will destroy at the end of time when he intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

**Apocrypha:** Literally, “hidden things”; used to describe a group of books on the fringe of the Jewish or Christian canons of Scripture. The Jewish Apocrypha contains such books as 1 and 2 Maccabees and 4 Ezra.

**Apollonius:** A pagan philosopher and holy man of the first century AD who could allegedly perform miracles and deliver divinely inspired teachings; a man believed by some of his followers to be a son of God.

**Apostle:** Literally, one who is “sent”; used of one who is commissioned to perform a task. In early Christianity, the term designated missionaries who were specially appointed by Christ. See **disciple**.

**Beatitudes:** Literally, “blessings”; used as a technical term to refer to sayings of Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” Matt 5:3–12).

**Canon:** From a Greek word that means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the canon of the New Testament is thus the collection of books that Christians accept as authoritative.

**Christ:** See **Messiah**.

**Christology:** Any teaching or doctrine about the nature of Christ.

**Contextual credibility, criterion of:** A criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material. With respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that any tradition about Jesus that cannot be credibly fit into his own first-century Palestinian context cannot be regarded as authentic.

**Cosmos:** Greek term for “world.”

**Covenant:** An agreement or treaty between two social or political parties; used by ancient Jews to refer to the pact that God made to protect and preserve them in exchange for their devotion and adherence to his law.

**Cynics:** Group of Greco-Roman philosophers known as street preachers who harangued their audiences and urged them to find freedom by becoming liberated from all social conventions. Because they chose to live "according to nature," with none of the niceties of life, their opponents called them "dogs" (Greek = *cynes*).

**Daimonia:** Category of divine beings in Greco-Roman paganism. *Daimonia* were thought to be less powerful than the gods but far more powerful than humans and capable of influencing human lives.

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** Ancient Jewish writings discovered in caves to the northwest of the Dead Sea; believed to have been produced by a group of apocalyptically minded Essenes who lived in a monastic community from Maccabean times through the Jewish War of AD 66–70. See **Essenes**, **Qumran**.

**Disciple:** A follower; literally, one who is "taught" (as opposed to an "apostle" = an emissary, one who is "sent").

**Dissimilarity, criterion of:** Criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; the criterion maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not coincide with (or that works against) the vested interests of the early Christians is likely to be authentic.

**Docetism:** From the Greek word *dokeo*, "to seem" or "to appear." Used to describe the view that Jesus was not a human being but only "appeared" to be.

**Egyptian, the:** A Jewish apocalyptic prophet of the first century AD, mentioned by Josephus, who predicted the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

**Equestrian:** The second-highest socioeconomic class of ancient Rome (below "Senator"), which was comprised of wealthy aristocrats.

**Essenes:** A sect of Jews that started during the Maccabean period who stressed maintaining their own ritual purity in the face of the coming apocalypse; its members are generally thought to have produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Fourth Philosophy:** A group of Jews mentioned by Josephus who insisted on violent opposition to the foreign domination of the Promised Land.

**Four-source hypothesis:** A solution to the "Synoptic Problem" that maintains that four sources lie behind the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: (1) Mark was the source for many of the stories found in Matthew and Luke, (2) Q was the source for the material (mainly sayings) found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, (3) M provided material found only in Matthew, and (4) L provided material found only in Luke.

**Gentile:** A non-Jew.

**Gnosticism:** A group of ancient religions, some of them closely related to Christianity, that maintained that elements of the divine had become entrapped in this evil world of matter. These divine elements could be released only by acquiring the secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and of how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary of the divine realm.

**Greco-Roman world:** The lands (and culture) around the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great to the Emperor Constantine, roughly 300 BC to AD 300.

**Hasmoneans:** An alternative name for the Maccabeans, the family of Jewish priests that began the revolt against Syria in 167 BC and ruled Israel before the Roman conquest of 63 BC.

**Hellenization:** The spread of Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean that began with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

**High Priest:** Before AD 70, the highest ranking official in Judaism when there was no Jewish king, in charge of the operation of the Jerusalem Temple and its priests. See **Sadducees** and **Sanhedrin**.

**Holy of Holies:** The inner part of the Jewish Temple in which God’s presence on earth was believed to dwell. No one could enter this room except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

**Independent attestation, criterion of:** Criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material. With respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that any tradition that is attested independently by more than one source is more likely to be authentic.

**Josephus:** First-century Jewish court historian, appointed by the Roman emperor Vespasian. His works, *The Jewish War* and *The Antiquities of the Jews*, are principal sources for information about life in first-century Palestine.

**Judas Maccabeus:** Jewish patriot who led the Maccabean revolt in its earliest phases. See **Hasmoneans**.

**L:** A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives but is believed to have provided Luke with traditions not found in Matthew or Mark. See **four-source hypothesis**.

**M:** A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives but is believed to have provided Matthew with traditions not found in Mark or Luke. See **four-source hypothesis**.

**Maccabean revolt:** The Jewish uprising against the Syrians starting in 167 BC; protested the forced imposition of Hellenistic religion and culture and the proscription of Jewish practices, such as circumcision, by the Syrian monarch Antiochus Epiphanes. See **Hasmoneans**.

**Manuscript:** A hand-written copy of a text.

**Markan priority:** The view that Mark, the first of the Synoptic Gospels written, was one of the sources used by Matthew and Luke.

**Messiah:** From a Hebrew word that literally means “anointed one,” translated into Greek as “Christos,” from which derives our English word “Christ.” The first century saw a wide range of expectations of whom this future deliverer might be: a great warrior king, a cosmic judge of the earth, or a mighty priest inspired to interpret God’s law.

**Mishnah:** A collection of oral traditions passed on by Jewish rabbis who saw themselves as the descendants of the Pharisees, put into writing around AD 200. See **Talmud**.

**Nag Hammadi:** Village in upper (south) Egypt, near the place where a Bedouin named Mohammed Ali discovered a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, in 1945.

**Paganism:** An umbrella term used for ancient polytheistic religions (i.e., other than Judaism and Christianity).

**Passion:** From the Greek word for “suffering”; refers to the traditions of Jesus’ last days, up to and including his crucifixion (hence the “Passion narrative”).

**Passover:** The most important and widely celebrated annual festival of Jews in Roman times, which commemorated the exodus from Egypt.

**Pentateuch:** Literally, the “five scrolls”; designates the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), also known as the Torah or the Law of Moses.

**Pentecost:** From the Greek word for fifty (= *pentakosia*); designates the Jewish agricultural festival that was celebrated fifty days after the feast of the Passover.

**Pharisees:** A Jewish sect that may have originated during the Maccabean period, which emphasized strict adherence to the purity laws of the Torah and developed special oral laws to help them to do so. See **Mishnah**.

**Pseudepigrapha:** Literally, “false writings”; ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written under pseudonyms.

**Pseudonymity:** The practice of writing under a “false name,” evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

**Q Source:** The source used by both Matthew and Luke for the stories they have in common that are not found in Mark (these are mainly sayings); from the German word *Quelle*, “source.” The document no longer exists but is reconstructed on the basis of Matthew and Luke.

**Qumran:** Place near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1945; in the first century, home to a group of Essenes who used the Scrolls as part of their library.

**Roman Empire:** All the lands conquered by Rome and ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 BC; before Augustus, Rome was a republic, ruled by the Senate.

**Sadducees:** A Jewish party closely connected with the Temple cult and the Jewish priests who ran it; comprised mainly of the Jewish aristocracy in Judea, whose leader, the high priest, served as the highest ranking local official and chief liaison with the Roman governor.

**Samaritans:** Inhabitants of Samaria, located between Galilee and Judea, who were considered by some Jews to be apostates and half-breeds, because their lineage could be traced to intermarriages between Jews and pagans several centuries before the New Testament period.

**Sermon on the Mount:** The sermon found in Matthew 5–7 that preserves some of the best known sayings of Jesus (including Matthew's form of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, and the Lord's Prayer).

**Sanhedrin:** A council of Jewish leaders that played an advisory role to the high priest in matters of religious and civil policy.

**Scribes, Jewish:** Highly educated experts in Jewish law (and possibly its copyists) during the Greco-Roman period.

**Senators:** The highest ranking members of the Roman aristocracy, comprised of the wealthiest men of Rome, who were responsible for governing the vast Roman bureaucracy during the Republic and were still active and highly visible under the Empire.

**Son of God:** In most Greco-Roman circles, a term used to designate a person born to the union of a God and a mortal, who was thought to be able to perform miraculous deeds or convey superhuman teachings. In Jewish circles, the term was used to designate a person chosen to stand in a special relationship with the God of Israel, including the ancient Jewish kings.

**Son of Man:** A much disputed term that is used in some ancient apocalyptic texts to refer to a cosmic judge sent from heaven at the end of time, based, probably, on Daniel 7:13–14.

**Synagogue:** An ancient place of Jewish worship, prayer, and reading of the Torah, from a Greek word that literally means “being brought together.”

**Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which narrate so many of the same stories that they can be placed next to each other and “be seen together” (the literal meaning of “synoptic”).

**Talmud:** The great collection of ancient Jewish traditions containing both the Mishnah and the later commentaries on the Mishnah called the Gemarah. There are two collections of the Talmud, one made in Palestine during the early fifth century AD and the other, in Babylon perhaps a century later. The Babylonian Talmud is usually considered the more authoritative.

**Theudas:** A first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet mentioned by Josephus who predicted the parting of the Jordan River and, evidently, the reconquest of the Promised Land by the Jewish people.

**Torah:** A Hebrew word meaning “guidance” or “direction”; usually translated as “Law.” As a technical term, it designates either the Law of God given to Moses or the first five books of the Jewish Bible that Moses was thought to have written, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**Tradition:** Any doctrine, idea, practice, or custom that is handed down from one person to another.

**Zealots:** A group of Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the early stages of the Jewish War against Rome in AD 66–70, overthrew the reigning aristocracy in the city, and urged violent resistance to the bitter end. See **Fourth Philosophy**.









# COURSE GUIDEBOOK



## The Historical Jesus

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